

Gian Biagio Conte

Stealing the Club from Hercules

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ON IMITATION IN LATIN POETRY

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On Imitation in Latin Poetry

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Foreword

This little book is the result of a relapse. I thought I had long since been cured of the (juvenile) affliction of literary theory, but clearly I was not permanently immunized. Many years ago, when I too was a victim of the widespread epidemic,¹ I wrote an essay pursuing those interests. Once the fever had abated I followed a different course. I occupied myself with interpreting poetic texts, then prose texts, and I composed a history of Latin literature; then I devoted myself to textual criticism and also prepared critical editions. In short, I practiced the usual trade-skills of a classical philologist. However, those earlier experiments with literary theory helped me to refine a method of textual analysis (a pursuit which in our profession has been honored by a long tradition of scholarship). Other scholars, not only in Italy but in Great Britain and the United States, have since accompanied me on that path, often explicitly referring to the ideas I articulated, at times with additions and developments.

The years have passed, not without leaving their traces. The field of textual analysis has changed considerably since those pages were written, and I too have developed some ideas in a different direction, or simply in a more nuanced and less rigid manner. Indeed, back when I was preoccupied with devising an organic system that could contain the different forms of literary imitation, I ended up burying among the elements of this system a procedure which for many reasons resisted harmonization and wanted its own space. I am referring to the *arte allusiva*, and the crucial problem of intentionality in imitation. It is not that I have repented of my earlier opinions, only that my second thoughts, today's thoughts, seem to me more reasonable than the earlier ones.

However, if I am returning to my old haunts it is not just to make amends. If anything, it is to show myself more resolute than I was in those days, when I reasoned as if the originality of poets, at least the great ones, was diminished by incidental traces of imitation, and thus concluded that originality had to declare itself *despite* the blemish caused by imitation. If I relapse now into the malady of theory, this is only to demonstrate (I try to do this in the first chapter, in which I analyse Virgil's working over of the text of Homer) that on the contrary, imitation very often is the actual path of originality, the condition *thanks to which* it is brought into being—at least in the classical literatures, and as I believe, not only there.

In the second chapter I reconstruct the presuppositions of a method. But above all I assess its limitations, whether negative or positive: in the negative column, the method contained its own deficiencies and blunders which it now

seems to me important, in the light of experience, to point out; on the positive side, it turned out to be powerfully effective, if its rules were respected. Its field of application was narrowly circumscribed: it did well what it was able to do, but lost value and impact if it overstepped the threshold of its legitimacy. It demanded restraint in its use. “The memory of the poets” (or intertextuality, as it would soon after be called by that felicitous and efficacious neologism) worked if one recognized the dynamism of a verbal network woven with the threads of poetic tradition; the tradition provided the materials ready for re-use, and the text repurposed it for a new meaning, its own real meaning. But the meaning—and this was the limit of the method—had to keep itself in check by respecting the concrete limits imposed by signs that could be practically rediscovered in the models, the only sure evidence of imitation.

Indeed, to allege an imitation without being able to point to convincing traces and proofs would be a serious betrayal of the intertextual method; it would emerge as invalidated beyond cure, and would lose the only merit that makes it strong, which consists in the ‘factual’ nature of the procedure of imitation, whereby the philologist is obliged in every case to supply objective evidence. This is a betrayal which in the recent past has been incorporated in the pages of some well-intentioned disciples of intertextual research, when, influenced by new hermeneutic experiences, they have enriched the traditional method with implausible applications. I will discuss these attempts with a touch of polemic coloring in the last part of the second chapter, but not with hostility. I even recognize in the work of these scholars ingenuity, and reasoned (if not reasonable) propositions. But I maintain—and this is what I am trying to prove—that such speculations, however evocative, invalidate the method and render it untrustworthy, inasmuch as they undermine its empirical foundations. Perhaps to these new acolytes the intertextual method seemed, so to speak, “impoverished” by restricting itself only to the explicit data of the text, and thus unable to function without unequivocally obvious data. Perhaps it will indeed prove to be impoverished, but it is a mark of intelligence to accept the limits of a method. In the rich encyclopedia of memory, there are countless elements than that in given text might evoke, but it is not legitimate to believe that everything that can be memorized becomes *by virtue of that fact* a potential object of imitation. The philologist can only take into account candidates that are actually justified by the purported imitation itself.

In recent years I have discussed these problems with friends but also with students of my seminar at the Scuola Normale of Pisa: I particularly thank for their suggestions Donatella Agonigi, Giulia Ammanati, Luigi Battezzato, Emanuele Berti, Lisa Piazzi, Valentina Prosperi and Alessandro Tosi.

1Stealing the club from Hercules

Nihil autem crescit sola imitatione

Quint. Inst.10.2.8

Biographers often cannot resist the temptation to romanticize the facts. To enliven a tale, or to dramatize it they supply their characters with some *bon mot* which they actually never uttered. One of the best known among the many anecdotes contained in the ancient lives of Virgil reports a sharp reply that the poet supposedly made to his malicious detractors. Even if the anecdote should really be attributed to the imagination of the schoolmasters, it preserves the traces of a debate which would soon preoccupy Virgil's ancient readers. When he was accused of having committed frequent *furta* in the *Aeneid* at the expense of the Homeric poems, Virgil supposedly retorted, "it is easier to steal Jupiter's thunderbolt or Hercules' club than a line from Homer."

The witticism, put in Virgil's own mouth rather than attributed to the defenders of his poem, has all the brusqueness of a daring challenge, even an openly provocative admission. "Actually, I don't deny that I stole. You try it, and see if you succeed!" As if he had said, "I alone was able to do this. I claim it as my own and demand your admiration." Here is the most explicit declaration of poetic theory that we can desire. The intimate reasons for an artist's method are lined up with proud confidence. We shall see this clearly further on.

To steal with skill should merit the same indulgence that the Spartans were said to grant; they punished not theft but the failure to conceal it.² Virgil did not submit to being charged with an offence that he did not recognize as such; rather, he turned the matter around and claimed that he should be given credit: he wanted admiration for the exceptional artistic vigor with which he had proved that he knew how to steal the club from Hercules, that poetic power with which he had demonstrated that he could act as the patron of magisterial models so as to turn them into his personal creations.

Eliot, who probably recalled the anecdote about Virgil and his malicious critics from his schooldays, appropriated the bold reply of the greatest Latin poet and wrote with comparable brusqueness, "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no

cohesion.”³

These are famous words, famous also for their bold and at one and the same time decisively paradoxical formulation (I sense even a touch of anti-Romantic impatience); Eliot must have felt himself personally implicated in the ancient feud over classical imitation. In fact, his pleading in defense of direct literary theft sounds like Cicero’s proverbial *oratio pro domo sua*. Eliot was really talking primarily about himself. He too had to answer for many lines stolen from other poets—so many that he reached the point of furnishing his poems with notes to declare his debts and borrowings openly. His detractors in their malice have insinuated that he hoped to cover with these explicit notices other thefts which had been left undeclared by himself. In just the same way, Boccaccio’s Ser Ciappelletto, a hardened offender, confessed only venial faults in order to conceal his more serious ones, and so gained sanctification. However, it is possible that Eliot, also a poet universally sanctified, was more innocent than Ser Ciappelletto; many of his reminiscences may have been unconscious and escaped his passion for confession—wreckage long since assimilated, and so well as to seem self-generated even to Eliot himself—self-generated, not imported from abroad. This is how the storehouse of memory functions, as a deposit of inert data that is still capable of returning to life on occasion.

Apparently Eliot is at odds with himself. As a practicing poet, he seems unwilling to acquire possessions without paying the bill. But when theorizing he exalts theft as a competitive gesture, an act of power and dexterity. When we reconsider, however, we understand that the two cases—that of the poet and that of the critic—affect each other mutually. There is no doubt that the art of a great poet consists in stealing with sovereign nonchalance when the opportunity arises, in appropriating to oneself another’s invention with the condescension of a patron. On the other hand, it is just as necessary for the reader to recognize what has been stolen so as to admire its skillful re-use; what was well placed there, is also well placed here. So the poet plays games with the reader lest the theft go unobserved. Only when the shadow of the original text is recognizable will the talent of the thieving-poet be fully appreciated by his readers.

Eliot does not hesitate to use the incriminating word “steal” to name this peremptory act of appropriation which best reveals the power of the mature poet. To lift a verse from Homer may seem to be an offence, but above all it is a feat; one should understand that to perform it is a difficult undertaking, more difficult than stealing the club from Hercules. It needs panache; it also requires courage.

In common morality, literary theft obviously met with general disapproval. It did not just reveal a lack of originality and betray a slack inspiration, but also exposed itself to the shameful accusation of plagiarism, that offence which really consisted either of usurping another man’s person or abusing his property, for example another man’s slave.⁴ The essential

arguments can be perceived in the brusque words which Cicero, as a theorist of literature, addresses in his famous dialogue (*Brutus* 76) to Ennius as an imitator of Naevius: *uel sumpsisti multa, si fateris, uel si negas surripuisti*. Here is the narrow strait in which a man who practices imitation finds himself. Only a frank acknowledgement can succeed in eluding the accusation of theft. “We can say that you have taken a lot from Naevius, if you are inclined to admit this, or, if you deny having done so, we must conclude that you stole it from him.”⁵ *Surripere*, “covert stealing,” implies not dexterity but fraud. This alone is why it becomes the blameworthy surrogate of an act of violence; it is the weak alternative to barefaced robbery.

Similar in substance, even if better articulated, is the verdict of Seneca the rhetorician, the critic of the first imperial generation who granted to Ovid the possibility of imitating without incurring the charge of *furtum* (*Suas.*3.7). In a verse of the lost tragedy *Medea*, the heroine apparently said *feror huc illuc, uae, plena deo* “I am driven here and there, alas, possessed by the god.” This would have been a phrase invented by Virgil and retrieved by Ovid, even if one cannot read *plena deo* in any surviving passage of Virgil’s works. Given that the passage seems problematic, or even if we succeed in solving the question with certainty (there have been many attempts, and quite a few solutions proposed⁶), in the report transmitted by Seneca the Elder we are especially interested in the accompanying comment:

Thus Ovid in imitating did what he had done for many other verses of Virgil, not with the aim of stealing but with the purpose of open borrowing, even wanting the Virgilian verse to be recognized in his own text. (*Itaque fecisse illum quod in multis aliis uersibus Vergili fecerat, non subripiendi causa sed palam mutuandi, hoc animo ut uellet agnosci.*)

The borrowing is public (*palam*): Ovid relies on his readers noticing the appropriation and appreciating his craft. The recognition is intended (*uellet agnosci*); not only is there no theft, but the graft would lose its effect without the awareness of outsiders.

Even if they do not vary much in their criteria of judgment, ancient mediators— grammarians, rhetoricians and commentators—always showed interest in the practice of literary imitation.⁷ Debate over the practice arose in Greece during the fourth century BC. The most original sayings, or at any rate the least banal, can be read in what is left to us of the *De Imitatione* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and in the first two chapters of Quintilian’s tenth book; but we will also find some valuable comments in the anonymous *On the Sublime* (13.2–4) and in the *Controuersiae* and *Suasoriae* of Seneca the Elder, not to mention the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius. Unfortunately the critical level attained by a large part of these works concerning the very common problem of imitation is collectively disappointing. Apart from some intermittent flights of insight, it is mostly a matter of bald judgments, too elementary and afflicted by moralizing tendencies. One can tolerate plagiarism with some distaste, but it always considered a product of inherent weakness in the imitator. In some

cases Quintilian shows an above-average shrewdness and even some freedom from prejudice; on the other hand, his interest is fixed on the orator rather than the poet, and the orator's chief prerequisite surely was not supposed to be absolute novelty of thought in language.

What discourages us in the conformist evaluations of these interpreters and critics is their incurable pedantry, especially if we compare them with the objective poetic excellence of the texts under judgment. Almost all of them, slaves to the ideology of the "first hand," show themselves resistant to appreciating results of even great artistic value if they are reached "secondhand"—as if the over-valuation of being first-born, like a weighty handicap, necessarily robbed all artistic derivatives of their value (a preconception like the one which devalued the "dawn" poetry of the German Romantic critics, enthusiastic admirers of every primitive, undetermined, *unbedingte* literary product).

But even in the eyes of censors the blameworthy handicap of *imitatio* can find redemption. This ransom is afforded only by the *zelos*, or *aemulatio*, of competing against the model. This is the only antidote known to them against the poison of imitation. Here is a good example: Thucydides was considered in scholastic institutions the absolute master of *syntomia*. Seneca the Elder (*Contr.* 9.1.13) quotes a famous saying which was falsely believed to be the historian's own (in reality it came from Pseudo-Demosthenes in *Epist. Phil* 13, but this is unimportant to us):

success is extraordinarily effective in hiding and putting in the shadow each man's mistakes. (δρῖναι γὰρ αἱ εὐπραξίαι συγκρύπτει καὶ συσκιάζει τὰ ἐκάστων ἁμαρτήματα)

Sallust derived one of his sayings from it (*Hist.* 1,55,24 "success is an incredibly good screen for vices": *res secundae mire sunt uitiiis obtentui*). The Roman historian defied Thucydides and "struck him on his own ground": *in suis illum castris cecidit*. In fact Seneca notes that Sallust is at least more concise than his model; you cannot subtract a single word from the formulation of the Latin historian (we could say that the level of redundancy is equal to zero); everything is strictly necessary. But from Thucydides' phrasing one could eliminate at least two words: συγκρύπτει or συσκιάζει. A contest in brevity. In short, the best defense against a possible accusation of plagiarism consists in imitation which seeks to compete with its model, or *aemulatio*. If the Greeks had excelled, they could only be rivaled; given that perfection itself invited a challenge, the first—obligatory—step on this path could only be imitation. But it was also important to disqualify the accusation of *furtum*. "Roman orators, historians, and poets did not steal many phrases from the Greeks, but instead they challenged them" (*multa oratores, historici, poetae Romani a Graecis dicta non surripuerunt, sed prouocauerunt*). Sometimes, however (and Seneca himself acknowledges it), the challenge ends badly for the imitators "they act like thieves who switch the handles of stolen goblets to prevent them from being recognized" (*Contr.* 10.5.20).

Indeed *aemulatio* demands ability; the imitator who loses the contest falls under the merciless accusation of plagiarism.

To put it plainly, there is a disparity in attitude between critics (grammarians and commentators) on the one side, and poets on the other. The first group, because of their scholastic training, suffered from the prejudice that imitation was intrinsically a slavish act, a subordinate condition difficult to redeem—in short, a blunder for which one should feel embarrassment and remorse. Poets, on the other hand, as pupils of Mnemosyne, peacefully laid claim to the *ius imitandi*, and felt no sense of inferiority when gathering the utterances of other poets, whether near or far in time, renowned or obscure. They freely aspired to a shared inheritance, of which each man was at once creator and legitimate possessor. Like the anarchist Proudhon, they regarded property as nothing but theft. They did not claim this explicitly, but all their casual practice betrayed this conviction—the opposite of that held by the critics, keen-eyed searchers documenting literary traits and petty thefts.

If we want to hear the opinion of a poet, let us listen to one of the greatest — renowned not only for his intellectual originality, but also for his ability to extract meters and features from the rich mines of the two classical literatures. In the *Ars Poetica* Horace confronts head on the problem of artistic imitation and poetic originality. In vv. 131–5, precisely because the traditional accusation of literary theft had long since taken on the features of a charge of illegitimacy, he puts the question as a point of law:

the materials in the public domain (*publica materies*) will become private property (*pruati iuris erit*)—that means they will become your personal inheritance, if you do not stick to the circuit common and open to all, if you refuse to cling word for word to the common model like an attendant interpreter (*nec uerbum uerbo curabis reddere fidus/interpres*); provided that in imitating you do not leap down into such a tight spot that shame at your incapacity or the rules of the genre prevent you from crawling out (*nec desilies imitator in artum/ unde pedem proferre pudor uetet aut operis lex*).

In short, the materials existing before each new literary creation—not just myths, but also topics, actions, poetic themes, stylistic procedures, verbal tricks and daring phrases—are a public heritage; they are common property and therefore very citizen is free to use them.

Having thus set aside the problem of legal property, Horace warns against a passive, inert use of the public inheritance: the materials must be reworked with personal energy and taste. He probably wants to condemn the low standards of the archaic dramatists, too submissive to Greek models to aspire to a new originality. The merit of the man who knows how to free himself through imitation depends entirely on the novelty of the results. Only in this way can what was previously a public inheritance become private property. In short, to escape subjection to the models, one must always start from them, but in a spirit of competition, aiming to surpass them.⁸ The offence does not consist in taking from others, nor in imitating, but in laying down the pen before having rendered into one's own personal language the language of

another contained in the rich inheritance of the literary tradition. This is Horace's view. And Seneca, the philosopher who reflected so shrewdly on the procedure of poetics, follows him, but also presses further. In one of his letters on a literary-artistic theme he writes without hesitation:

(79.6) It makes a great difference whether you approach a subject already exhausted, or one which others have already tilled (*multum interest utrum ad consumptam materiam an ad subactam accedas*); the material is enriched with the passage of time, and what has been discovered is no obstacle to those who will discover something else again (*crescit in dies et inuenturis inuenta non obstant*).

Furthermore, the best position to occupy is that of the last writer to arrive: he finds the words already prepared for him, words which after rearrangement will acquire a new appearance (*praeterea condicio optima est ultimi; parata uerba inuenit, quae aliter instructa nouam faciem habent*). And we should not think that he is claiming the wealth of another poet, since this concerns public property (*nec illis manus incit tamquam alienis; sunt enim publica*). How foreign Horace and Seneca seem to the narrow controversy championed by the censors of poetic thefts! On the hill of the Muses community of property thrives; possession is granted simply by use. And it is precisely use that increases the common heritage.

On another occasion (the famous Letter 84, which resembles a short treatise) the philosopher again faces the problem of literary imitation with mastery; the imitator must digest his models to the point of deriving from them a new substance marked by his personal originality. "We ought to imitate bees, which wander and select the flowers best suited to make honey, and then dispose of everything they have extracted and distribute it in the combs (*apes debemus imitari, quae uagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quicquid attulere disponunt ac per fauos digerunt...*). §4 "We don't really know whether they draw the sap from the flowers so that it turns straight into honey, or whether they change what they have gathered into that tasty sweetness by blending it with their vital breath." (*De illis non satis constat utrum sucum ex floribus ducunt qui protinus mel sit, an quae collegerunt in hunc saporem mixtura quadam et proprietate spiritus sui mutant...*): "not without adding a fermenting agent that acts on the varying elements by blending them into one" (*non sine quodam, ut ita dicam, fermento quo in unum diuersa coalescent*): "let us imitate the bees in this behavior; ... like them we should, with the aid of our diligence and talent, melt these different tastes into a single flavor, so that even if the source of what we have achieved is discovered, the result seems different from that source" (*nos quoque has apes debemus imitari...deinde adhibita ingenii nostri cura et facultate in unum saporem uaria illa libamenta confundere, ut etiam si apparuerit unde sumptum sit, aliud tamen esse quam unde sumptum est appareat*).

It is difficult to give a better description of the process of imitation and personal synthesis. Seneca does not refrain from adding (thus truly banalizing

his first thought) another parallel: even food, digested, changes its specific and multiple nature to produce simultaneously energy and blood. We too, he concludes, should digest our reading (§7); otherwise, if the texts are not assimilated they will not produce new intellectual energies, but lie inert in the memory (*alioqui in memoriam ibunt, non in ingenium*). The last comment proclaims, “let our mind act like this; let it hide everything which it has exploited and show only what it has had the skill to produce.” (*hoc faciat animus noster; omnia quibus est adiutus abscondat, ipsum tamen ostendat quod effecit.*)

The same letter contains another idea associated with the problem of imitation which has enjoyed great success: Petrarch claimed it as his own and in *Familiares* XXIII 19 §78–94 expanded it into a passage of extraordinary suggestive power.⁹ Seneca recommended (Letters 84 §8), “if some trace of resemblance appears in you that derives from a strong admiration deeply imposed upon you by the model, I want it to be the resemblance of a son to his father, not that of a portrait; a portrait is a dead object” (*Etiam si cuius in te comparebit similitudo quem admiratio tibi altius fixerit, similem esse te uolo quomodo filium, non quomodo imaginem; imago res mortua est*). See what Petrarch has to say about imitating Virgil in his letter to Boccaccio (XXIII.19.11): “the man who imitates should concern himself with being like, not equal, to the model in what he writes, and this resemblance should not be that which relates the object and its image, which affords greater luster to the artist, but the likeness between father and son” (*curandum imitatori ut quod scribit simile non idem sit, eamque similem talem esse oportere non qualis est imaginis ad eum cuius imago est, quae quo similior eo maior laus artificis, sed qualis filius ad patrem.*) “Thus we should take care that while one thing is like, many things are unlike, and that very similarity stays hidden, so that it cannot be detected except by the silent exploration of the mind, and it can be guessed at rather than expressed in words.” (§ 13 *sic et nobis prouidendum ut cum simile aliquid sit multa sint dissimilia et id ipsum simile lateat ne deprehendi possit nisi tacita mentis indagine, ut intellegi simile queat potiusque dici.*) “So we should use another man’s concepts and his style but avoid his words; for while the first of these two manners of resemblance is hidden, the other is conspicuous; the former makes poets, the latter produces apes.” (*utendum igitur ingenio alieno utendumque coloribus, abstinendum uerbis, illa enim similitudo latet, hec eminet; illa poetas facit, hec simias.*)

Even defining clumsy imitations as “apelike” derives to some extent from Senecan theorizing. In letter 114.18 Seneca had humorously laid his finger on the weaknesses of an admirer of Sallust who was so obsessed with reproducing some of his more conspicuous traits that he created from them a veritable mannerism: “these figures of speech were rare and intermittent in Sallust, but frequent and almost continuous in his followers. And this is easily explained. Sallust occasionally came upon such expressions, but the imitator went searching for them.” (*quae apud Sallustium rara fuerunt, apud hunc*

crebra sunt et paene continua, nec sine causa: ille enim in haec incidebat, at hic illa quaerebat.) Quintilian agrees with Seneca; even if he inculcates his exhortations with professorial aplomb, he also knows that imitating well is not easy: the hazards of superficiality and banalization weigh down upon you (10.2.15–16): “At least those who have had enough critical sense to avoid the defects of their models should not be content with reproducing the appearance of excellence and, so to speak, only the skins, or rather those images that Epicurus says emanating from the surface of bodies.” (*ne uero saltem iis quibus ad euitanda uitia iudicii satis fuit, sufficiat imaginem uirtutis effingere, et solam ut ita dixerim cutem uel potius illas Epicuri figuras quas e summis corporibus dicit effluere.*) “This happens to those who, without having deeply scrutinized the virtues they wished to imitate, have stayed attached to the immediate surface of the speech.” (*hoc autem illis accidit, qui non introspectis penitus uirtutibus ad primum se uelut aspectum orationis aptarunt.*) “Even when imitation seems almost successful, although the results are not very different in words and rhythms, they don’t achieve the same expressive vigor and power of invention, but for the most part fall into inferior language and incur the defects which almost always accompany these merits; thus they become emphatic, but not elevated, sinewy but not concise, rash and not brave, decadent instead of flourishing, jerky instead of rhythmical, careless instead of straightforward.” (*et cum illis felicissime cessit imitatio uerbis atque numeris sunt non multum differentes, uim dicendi atque inuentionis non adsecuntur, sed plerumque declinant in peius et proxima uirtutibus uitia comprehendunt fiuntque pro grandibus tumidi, pressis exiles, fortibus temerarii, laetis corrupti, compositis exultantes, simplicibus negligentes.*)

Before abandoning this brief critical survey I should mention an occasional thought of Quintilian himself, an *obiter dictum* apparently negligible, but really deserving full attention. That the imitation of great models is the chief avenue to producing more excellent literature is an uncontested matter for the great teacher of rhetoric.¹⁰ On the other hand, it also happens that an imitator has no intention of imitating but does so inadvertently, recuperating a residue of buried memory out of unconscious attachment to his reminiscences. In short, this possibility too—and the most common, in my opinion—has presented itself to Quintilian’s critical mind and we must credit him with it. There is in fact a passage in the *Institutio* (2.7.4) which to my knowledge is unique in all ancient criticism, in which such a case is considered, if only for a fleeting moment. “They will always have within themselves models to imitate and even *unconsciously* they will reproduce the fine forms of speech that they have assimilated in the depths of their mind.” (*semperque habebunt intra se quod imitentur, et iam non sentientes formam orationis illam, quam mente penitus acceperint, experiment.*) “They will possess a great abundance of chosen words, of artistic structures, of figures which they will not be obliged to search out, but which will offer themselves spontaneously, as if from a hidden treasury.”

(*abundabunt autem copia uerborum optimorum et compositione ac figuris iam non quaesitis, sed sponte ex reposito uelut thesauro se offerentibus.*) The mind and spirit of every poet are an infinite reserve of inert memories and associations, temporarily at rest but ready to make themselves available for new literary creations.



But let us return to Virgil and his slanderers. It is a good rule, if we want to form a balanced judgment, to pay more heed to slanderers than defenders; the former are malicious but their hostility often offers more cause for reflection than the applause of the other group. While the encomiasts, misled by their own enthusiasm, risk preaching only their own banal admiration, the backbiters find themselves compelled to make arguments for their prejudices and give reason after reason to justify their dissent. They are miserly with praise and lavish with censure, but we can learn much more from their accusations than from the others. Certainly it takes effort to contradict them; indeed, for just this reason they force you to descend into matters more deeply, to explore other faces of the question, to work out new criteria of judgment strong enough to overthrow their adverse criticisms.

The most celebrated of the tribe of detractors was Zoilus, a rhetorician and sophist of the 4th century BC who earned himself the name of *Homeromastix*, “the lasher of Homer,” by writing a weighty work of criticism (probably entitled “Against the Poetry of Homer”) in which he ridiculed with rather captious arguments the absurdity of certain situations in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Vitruvius, with gleeful satisfaction, assures us that the backbiter came to a horrible end; according to some sources he died on the cross, according to others he was stoned, and according to yet others he was burned alive.¹¹ With equal satisfaction the Suda maintains that he paid for his bitterness at the avenging hands of the citizens of Olympia, who were indignant at his burning spitefulness. His cursed tongue had brazenly pricked not just the divine Homer but also great contemporary writers like Plato and Isocrates; obviously he did not inconvenience himself for small matters but attacked only the highest peaks. He was an opponent who practiced contrariety in method and system; in fact he not only dared to dislodge the poet whom everyone considered the genial inspiration of all literature, but on top of that he actually wrote an encomium of Polyphemus.

So there was cause to expect that immediately after the publication of the *Aeneid*, the poem that made Virgil into the Latin Homer, some detractor would leap up, ready to discredit the new masterwork. Carvilius Pictor, if we are to believe the notices in Virgil’s biographers, took inspiration from the *Homeromastix* to write his *Aeneomastix*; earlier a man called Numitor had disgorged all his intolerance in a stupid pamphlet with the transparent title of *Antibucolica*. The malevolence of some Virgilian critics need not concern us further; whether it was caused by jealousy or the foolish passion for “cutting

the lion's claws," it seems a normal reaction to the enormous success which Virgil's poetry provoked immediately from the Roman people. What interests us more is that the detractors realized so easily that the new works paradoxically achieved their originality by imitating Theocritus with the aim of creating a substantially different bucolic poetry; imitating Hesiod with the goal of writing a new didactic poetry, and finally imitating Homer in order to produce an epic entirely Roman in both spirit and language. What provoked the detractors, apart from the ambitious nature of the proposal, was a disconcerting aporia: the path followed was that of imitation but the results appeared overwhelmingly new. Originality, in fact, was reached by an unexpected detour. If I am allowed a play on words, originality was attained by a return to the very origins of poetry. For hostile critics imitation was a slavish practice, and the recognizability of the model simply entailed the charge of *furtum*. Already a few decades after the death of Virgil the learned scholar Asconius Pedianus found himself compelled to take up the poet's defence with a book entitled "Against the detractors of Virgil." But the scholastic dispute had been sufficiently kindled and only died out after considerable time.

In fact its traces can be found more than three centuries afterward, even though they had long since been trampled. In his *Saturnalia* Macrobius presents a number of learned Romans and Greeks discussing Virgil's poetry; together they all give voice to an unreserved encomium of the *maximus poetarum* but among them (they are all important historic figures) there is a fictitious contradictor, coarse and petulant, Evangelus, who with his malicious interruptions personifies the long sequence of past detractors. It is these fellows whom Rufus Albinus has in mind when in *Saturnalia* VI.1.2 he says "while I want to show the profit that our Virgil extorted from reading his predecessors, whether the flowers he plucked from them all or the ornaments he selected from various authors to embellish his poetry, I am afraid of offering malicious or incompetent persons the cue to criticize him. They could in fact have accused such a great poet of plagiarism, not taking into consideration that the advantage produced from his reading consists precisely in his seeking to match what is approved in others and opportunely turning to his own use whatever stimulates the most admiration in their works. This is what our Roman writers—indeed, even the best of them—have often done, either by imitating each other, or by imitating the best of the Greeks, who were also imitating each other." (*et quos ex omnibus flores uel quae in carminis sui decorem ex diuersis ornamenta libauerit, occasionem reprehendendi uel imperitis uel malignis ministrem, exprobrantibus tanto uiro alieni usurpationem nec considerantibus hunc esse fructum legendi, aemulari ea quae in aliis probes, et quae maxime inter aliorum dicta mireris in aliquem usum tuum oportuna deriuatione conuertere; quod et nostri tam inter se quam a Graecis et Graecorum excellentes inter se saepe fecerunt.*)

Here is the treachery that was being denounced, the deadly treachery that

entailed the charge of *furtum*. Rufius Albinus then concentrated his efforts on showing how very different from each other the two texts, the original and its transformation, came to be in the end (*Saturnalia* VI.2.1): “after having examined the verses taken partly or wholly from others, or even, so to speak dipped in a different dye, thanks to the modification of certain words, I now intend to compare the passages; you will be able to recognize the origin of their formation as if they were reflected in a mirror.” (*post uersus ab aliis uel ex integro uel ex parte translatos, uel quaedam immutando uerba tamquam fuco alio tinctos, nunc locos locis componere sedet animo, ut unde formati sint quasi de speculo cognoscas.*)

But the same critic, Albinus, had made his most resolute pronouncement at the opening of his contribution—an enthusiastic judgment which definitively transcended the narrow terms of the ancient polemic on *furta* (VI.1.6): “Finally his own good taste in transferring and his art of imitation achieved this result: that what harks back to others in his works we readers either simply prefer to consider as the fruit of his invention or we note in amazement that it sounds better there than in the original passage.” (*Denique et iudicio transferendi et modo imitandi consecutus est, ut quod apud illum legerimus alienum aut illius esse malimus aut melius hic quam ubi natum est sonare miremur*). Note that the decisive step has been taken; we simply prefer to believe that the imitation is the product of his own imagination. Appropriation has produced a new kind of property. We might even say the plunderer has discovered how to improve on his spoils. Not only does the dexterity of the imitator legitimize the theft, but the model, artistically transformed, seems actually to gain in poetic force. The man who steals Hercules’ club ends up becoming stronger than Hercules.

In the name of an exercise in argumentation we might state two principles, both true in themselves but opposed to each other. The first says, “There is no originality, at least in the sense that nothing can be primal, absolutely immune from previous experience; by force of nature every artifact is to some extent the product of imitation, recovery or development of previous material.” The antithetical principle declares, “There is no imitation, at least in the sense that the *prius dictum* reappears every time in new contexts and hence comes to take on new functions and new implications; this excludes the possibility of imitation (understood as an inert repurposing of alien elements).” I am not risking myself in the labyrinth of aporia, I am only trying to justify affirmations like this: “Virgil is completely different from Homer, although it is true that he imitates him.” Or even like this other more conclusive claim: “This phrase of Virgil is not Homer imitated, it is Homer transformed.” That means we find ourselves before a Homer who is no longer Homer, like coral that has coagulated from blood vomited by the petrifying head of Medusa, just as laurel was formerly the sinuous body of the nymph Daphne, but is now a tree with branches and leaves. Then we must ask ourselves, Does the process of metamorphosis itself participate in imitation? Can we say that the second

stage “imitates” the primary stage, the one destined to disappear? The stones of Deucalion and Pyrrha had veins in which, after the miracle of regeneration, the living blood of men and women began to flow, but now they are no longer the flinty “bones of the great mother earth.” The “after” virtually coexists with the “before.” The economy of metamorphosis requires the new forms to recycle as far as possible the materials of the old ones. Sometimes metamorphosis is seen as a fusion of two bodies, and not just as a transformation of one into the other; thus in *Metamorphoses* (4.378–9) Ovid relates of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus *nec duo sunt, sed forma duplex*, “and they are no longer two individuals but a single double shape.” This is the androgyne. With rationalistic insistence the poet then specifies: *neutrumque et utrumque uidetur* “it has the appearance of neither but at the same time has the appearance of each.”

I believe this is the best possible definition of the process of artistic transformation: in it not only the presence of resemblances but also their absence is valorized. The new structure is no longer the previous one, but in a certain sense it still is. In the double shape, the resemblances may predominate (and then this will be imitation), or the differences will predominate (and then it is not permitted to talk of imitation). The oscillating dialectic between “before” and “after,” the old and the new, is the compulsory path of creative activity. Even the absolute originality of the Creator chose to make man in his own image and likeness. This was an act of imitation.

My generation learnt from the structuralist studies undertaken in linguistic circles (but we sort of knew it already, as I will say in the [second chapter](#)) that every discourse is constructed as a system of differences. It is the very differences which, once coherently organized, produce sense. Virgil’s work, as Macrobius rightly notes (*Saturnalia* V.2.130), is like a mirror of the poems of Homer: *opus Vergilianum uelut de quodam Homericis operis speculo formatum est*. A new image springs from it which is now the fruit of condensation, now of amplification, now the result of an inversion, now of a combination, and now simply a silent presupposition; it is the differences that create the new sense. Virgil’s act is a genuine act of “occupation” of the Homeric text, and I am referring to the particular method of acquiring property which the code of private law regularly acknowledges. For the poet of the *Aeneid*, the dialectic of appropriation requires the new possessor to show enough modesty to put on the outer clothing of the imitator and cloak his real ambitions. As if Virgil by this gesture wanted nothing more than to make men believe that the *Aeneid* is nothing but the third poem of Homer, but in the end revealed his immodest purpose: to evict Homer, and displace him.

Certainly Homer is still the undying source of poetry, the inexhaustible repertory of all literature past and present, but he has also become a monument to approach with reverence; he is marvelous and intangible. The Greek poets, Alexandrian and Roman, could also cite him and pay him respectful homage; from him they could derive momentum and suggestions,

embedding in their own texts some of his lapidary phrases or some evocative epithet; his own canonized authority still made him a permanent fixture, equal to himself alone. Such absolute authority is the only characteristic of Homer which Virgil wanted to leave untouched; indeed, he wanted to reconfirm it in all its might. He drew on it to make himself a patron of that archetypal atmosphere that is the incomparable guarantee of the new poem. But his operating strategy has an entirely opposite purpose: he is aiming to detach Homer from his intangibility and its monumentally imposing nature. He dismembers Homer's books, disorders his sequences and episodes at the level of individual verses, deconstructs the narrative structures—and then freely reconstructs them. The *Odyssey* with the wanderings endured by its hero will become the palimpsest of the first part of the *Aeneid*; the *Iliad* with its battles and glorious victims will in its turn disappear beneath the war endured by Aeneas on Italian soil.

An allegorical-philosophical narrative, a myth that arose about Dionysus (Olympiodorus, Commentary on *Phaedo* 67.c; Proclus, Commentary on *Timaeus* 33b), tells how the infant god while playing with a looking-glass broke it into many pieces and these individual fragments gave birth to the variety of things in the world. Thus Homer acts as a looking-glass for Virgil, but he is a glass whose fragments recombine themselves into a work that intends to be completely different. What Virgil actually intends is an eminently modern result. It is this very modernity—the idea that Rome is ready for a cultural and political renewal—which is the urgent objective of the entire Augustan renaissance. The many centuries that elapsed between the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had modernized Homer in successive stages, each time for different tastes: the great Attic tragedians had drawn material and inspiration from the Trojan cycle (“crumbs” from the banquet of Homer), deepening the expanse of grief within which the heroes of myth had acted; philosophical speculation had reconsidered the exemplarity of Homeric culture and reconceived it to match the demands of the present; the Hellenistic poets had “de-objectified” the Homeric world by lyricizing it and dyeing it with their subjectivism—a continuous process of modernization of which Virgil had acquired an extraordinary knowledge and a perfect awareness.

So we might say that Virgil had two Homers in front of him: the original poet, untouched and fabulous, and the poet as he had been received, continuously revisited and variously reinterpreted in more or less recent literary experiments. Virgil shows signs of wanting to become the patron in particular of the first of these two Homers. We have already said this: Virgil's originality consists of his unforeseeable return to his origins. Thus, just as his act of appropriation constructs itself paradoxically by starting from the slavish act of artistic imitation, so too the most ancient Homer is paradoxically summoned to provide the external configuration of Virgilian modernity, the genetic form in which to inscribe contemporaneity. Transplanted into the

Augustan age by a poet who is inventing the new values—new also to the Roman community for whom the *Aeneid* was destined—Homer brings as his dowry the incomparable fascination of his remote world; but it is also true that as a consequence of the expropriation carried out by Virgil, Homer himself emerges strengthened and regains in full his own function as a model for elevated poetry. His outer forms will be penetrated by a completely new sensibility, which runs clandestinely through his text while giving the impression of not violating it. Even the new poetic substance which I shall call “the internal form” of the *Aeneid* and of its personages will bow to demonstrate a respectful acceptance of these external forms and a fervent adhesion to them. This is how the proposal of a new heroism, thoughtful and civilized, can impose itself surreptitiously while finding a warrant and precedent in the heroism of the mythical age. Each item lifted in the theft will seem to recall Homer openly, but the whole will be much more than the sum of its individual parts. Even if Aeneas inherits and accumulates singular features of Odysseus, Achilles and Hector, his profile will be that of a hero who embodies a culture long since foreign, a culture in the process of completion. The dialectic which binds the Book of the Greek world to the new scripture of the Latin community, while it disguises as the right of succession what is really a thieving appropriation, sets in motion a close comparison between the myth of Greek origins and actual Roman history. We might say that Homer himself, transplanted into the Augustan renaissance, is called up to rewrite his poems in person, but using the hand, mind and heart of Virgil. The agonistic quality of the relationship that binds Roman Virgil to Homer, a direct relationship between equals, will never find full expression.

Certainly—and this is a component of Virgil’s poetic experience which must always be vigorously reaffirmed—there would never have been an *Aeneid* without the evocative grieving of Attic tragedy or the subjectivising manner of Hellenistic epic. Virgil, the mature pupil of Alexandrian poetry, has drawn on all his debts: the loans and quotations and recoveries, the chance impulses and occasional insertions come from the entire (and I mean entire) Greek and Roman literary tradition (it will be Ennius first and foremost, but also Lucretius and Catullus who face us so often in the verses of the *Aeneid*). Virgil’s learning, his prodigious literary memory, is a lavish treasury which at every moment of composition dutifully expands canonical motifs and forms of diction. It is a well equipped larder waiting only to contribute actively to the formation of a new text.

But for Virgil Homer is not just one among many poetic models to imitate; he is quite different from a persistent return of memory. His role is completely privileged, absolutely unique. This essential aspect has not always been appreciated in its full scope, neither by the criticism of the ancients nor that of the moderns. We must come to understand that Homer is nothing less than the very matrix of the external form of the *Aeneid*, *natura naturans*, as Spinoza would say. His presence is immanent in the Virgilian text, a presence injected

as a potentiality of the new writing—it is the “mother and nurse” of narrative inventions and the grand style. For this reason Virgil follows the lofty model from close at hand, and for the same reason he so often releases himself from it: both are obligatory measures for the man who has decided to turn the work of Homer into his own chosen venue, but who also wants his new text to be a marked counterpoint to it.

Thus the *Aeneid* is enlivened with a wise polyphony, thanks to which, according to two distinctive melodic designs, imitation and originality blend at every step into a play of consonance and dissonance. Homer’s work is the counterpart of Hercules’ club, of a thunderbolt stolen from Zeus; we intuit here and there in the Virgilian text the pride of the plunderer. But beside it there is also clearly visible the reassuring pleasure of genealogical affiliation: “this is my inheritance because I have taken possession of it, but with me the inheritance does not leave the circle of the family.” The new epic text strips bare the old, but does not eliminate it; it turns it into the horizon within which it can safely move, or better, it makes it the necessary interlocutor in a close and equalised debate. Interdiscursivity (the term which Cesare Segre prefers in some cases to intertextuality) does not propose a mere contest of strength between imitator and imitated, as there would be if everything was reduced to simple emulation; rather it establishes a dialogue, an exchange of thought between two voices, a continuous confrontation between juxtaposed forms and languages.

An example of the skill with which Virgil first steals the skeleton of the Homeric text and then stretches and transforms it from within can express more than any number of generalizations. In the *Iliad*, book XVI is entirely dedicated to the aristeia of Patroclus. The valiant companion of Achilles triumphs victoriously on the field of battle, killing many Trojan warriors before he is felled by the weapons of Hector (who thus seals his own destiny, to die at the hands of Achilles as avenger). To stop Patroclus, Sarpedon, son of Zeus and Laodamia, bravely confronts him. As king of the Lycians, Sarpedon is fighting alongside the allies in the attack on the Greek wall. When Patroclus and Sarpedon are on the point of combat the scene shifts to Olympus. Zeus, moved to pity by the grievous action which he has been witnessing, turns to his wife Hera (433 ff):

Alas! Sarpedon, dearest of men to me, it is his destiny to be killed by Patroclus, son of Menoetius. My heart is split in two while I doubt within whether I should swoop down to seize him alive from the struggling battle and put him in safety in the fertile land of Lycia, or cause his death at the hand of the son of Menoetius.

ὦ μοι ἐγών, ὃ τέ μοι Σαρπηδόνα, φίλτατον ἀνδρῶν,
μοῖρ’ ὑπὸ Πατρόκλοιο Μενoitιάδῳ δαμῆναι.
διχθὰ δέ μοι κραδίη μέμονε φρεσὶν ὀρμαίνοντι,
ἤ μιν ζῶντα μάχης ἅπο δακρυοέσσης
θείῳ ἀναρπάξας Λυκίης ἐν πίονι δήμῳ,
ἢ ἥδη ὑπὸ χερσὶ Μενoitιάδῳ δαμάσσω.

Hera opposes him, and in any case she is not too inclined to aid Zeus' adulterously begotten son (440 ff.):

Dread son of Cronos, what an outrageous thing you have said! You want to withdraw a man who is mortal, marked long since for his destiny, from his cruel death? Do it then, but surely all of us other gods do not give our approval. And I will tell you another thing, and you must plant it in your mind. If you send Sarpedon alive to his home, take care that some other god will not want to send his dear son far from the vicious battle; indeed, many sons of immortals are fighting around the great city of Priam. And you will create a tremendous rage among them.

αἰνότατε Κρονίδη, ποῖον τὸν μῦθον ἔειπες.
ἄνδρα θνητὸν ἔοντα, πάλαι πεπρωμένον αἴσῃ,
ἃς ἐθέλεις θανάτοιο δυσὴχέος ἔξαναλῦσαι;
ἔρδ'· ἀτὰρ οὐ τοὶ πάντες ἐπαινέομεν θεοὶ ἄλλοι.
ἄλλο δέ τοι ἔρέω, σὺ δ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσιν·
αἱ κε ζῶν πέμψῃς Σαρπηδόνα ὄνδε δόμονδε,
φράζεο μὴ τις ἔπειτα θεῶν ἐθέλῃσι καὶ ἄλλος
πέμπειν ὃν φίλον υἱὸν ἀπὸ κρατερῆς ὑσμίνης·
πολλοὶ γὰρ περὶ ἄστὶ μέγα Πριάμοιο μάχονται
υἷεες ἀθανάτων, τοῖσιν κότον αἰνὸν ἐνήσεις.

Then Hera advises him to let Sarpedon die in combat, but in compensation she asks Zeus to send Death and Sleep to transport his corpse to the land of Lycia for the funeral ceremonies: “this is actually the privilege of the dead” and “the father of gods and men does not disobey (οὐδ' ἀπίθησε) but sheds drops of blood on the earth (αἱματοέσσας ... ψιάδας) to honour his son, whom Patroclus was about to kill on the fertile soil of Troy far from his country.” This is not one of the most conspicuous episodes in the action of the *Iliad*; it resumes the *aristeia* of Patroclus and, even if it stands out among the many killings of the sixteenth book it is marginal with respect to the overall action of the poem. But Virgil rips the scene from its Homeric context and loads it with important structural functions in the economy of the *Aeneid*, and he makes it a pivotal point.¹² The transformation of Homer is absolutely radical. In Virgil's tenth book—“the book of unbalanced duels,” in which Pallas confronts Turnus, and Lausus confronts Aeneas—the young prince of the Arcadians, entrusted by his father Evander to the guardianship of Aeneas, fights heroically against the Rutuli, laying many of them low until Turnus seeks him out, finds him and with odiously cruel joy, challenges him. The lad Pallas, a novice warrior on his first day of battle, does not flinch at the duel and even replies to the threats of his enraged enemy with heroic pride. Before hurling his lance he addresses a prayer to his sacred protector, Hercules Hospes.¹³ But Hercules, in the celestial abode of the gods, shirks the request and groaning with grief, sheds tears of impotence (10.464 ff.):

Alcides hears the young man and smothers a mighty groan deep in his heart, shedding futile tears. Then his father Jove turns to his son with affectionate words. “For each man his day is determined, short and irrevocable and for all their life is fixed; but to prolong one's glory with feats, that is the task of valour. Beneath the lofty walls of Troy so many

sons of gods fell, and Sarpedon my son fell with them. Destiny summons even Turnus and he has long since reached the endpoint of life assigned to him.” So he spoke and removed his sight from the lands of the Rutuli.

*Audiit Alcides iuuenem magnumque sub imo
corde premit gemitum lacrimasque effundit inanis.
Tum genitor natum dictis adfatur amicis:
“stat sua cuique dies, breue et irreparabile tempus
omnibus est vitae; sed famam extendere factis
hoc uirtutis opus. Troiae sub moenibus altis
tot gnati cecidere deum; quin occidit una
Sarpedon, mea progenies; etiam sua Turnum
fata uocant, metasque dati peruenit ad aeu.”
Sic ait atque oculos Rutulorum reicit aruis.*

At this point the unstoppable sequence of fatal events is set in motion. Turnus, the “primitive” hero, substantially Homeric, and so foreign to the new cultural sensibility of which Aeneas is (still half unconsciously) the bearer, will kill young Pallas and without any respect for his weakness vulnerability will strip him of his myth-laden baldric as a trophy of war. It is a cursed trophy, and the wrenching sight of it at the end of the poem will provoke Aeneas to take vengeance on Turnus. Thus the death of Pallas becomes the turning point, the critical moment, the point of change, in the second part of the *Aeneid*. But beyond this decisive function which the divine intermezzo comes to acquire in Virgil’s narrative strategy, there is much more in the transformation of the Homeric model. We are facing a new theology, and a new ethics outlines itself; Homer is left behind.

If the proper skill of great poetry is to create necessities and expectations which it is unable to satisfy even at the actual moment, the *Aeneid* too in working out this scene succeeds in making us feel the approach of a different world— indeed, it announces ambitiously that it has arrived. Readers cannot fail to be aware of it. Virgil recalls the episode of the death of Sarpedon absolutely explicitly, as if Jupiter in the *Aeneid* openly wanted to disavow himself, or better the Zeus that he once was and should no longer be. And to do this with full clarity, Jupiter cites himself, or better the text of Homer: *quin occidit una / Sarpedon, mea progenies*. The Roman reader of the *Aeneid* knows all about the death of Sarpedon and Zeus’s tortured doubts and Hera’s opportunistic protests, but Virgil puts this episode perforce before his eyes, because comparison of the two texts makes evident the changes that have been worked, thereby inviting judgment upon the Homeric model. In Homer Zeus, even as the most powerful father of the gods, shows himself vulnerable to human passion, suffers and reacts without self-control; he is not impartial and even blunders in inconvenient favoritism; he would be inclined to break the unmovable *moira* of death already determined for Sarpedon. Hera seems more pragmatic but her political realism is only an everyday bit of common sense. Virgil disassembles the scene and freely recomposes its constitutive parts: he changes (even reverses) the functions of the roles, creating a

grandiose spectacle of theological sublimity and calm dignity. The role of the antagonist is anticipated, and given to Hercules, the deified hero who, in keeping with his mortal origin, is still open to compassion. However, he succeeds in controlling his manifestations of mourning. Jupiter takes on the “rationalistic” role that had belonged to Hera, but gives to her words, final and conclusive, a lapidary tone of incontrovertible truth: she is the interpreter and executor of the absolute necessity of fate.

The stoicization of Jupiter is part of the ideological system constructed by the *Aeneid*. The greatest of the gods puts on his full royal nature, and with it also receives the nobility of *gravitas* and, above all, Roman *decorum*—the law of the universe that cannot be violated by the caprices of any being. What is left to men is *uirtus*: to prolong, according to each man’s strength, the shortness of life. Homer must bow before the rules of imitation; he must have his verses stolen in order to see them once again capable of creating an ideal world, a new morality, a new form of living, more civil and more modern, but always heroic, as the life offered by Homer in person so many centuries before had been. In short: to compose *de quodam Homerici operis speculo* is an act not of imitative subjection but rather of revitalizing antiquity, and at the same time an act from which the legitimacy and relative autonomy of the present emerge as exalted.

While the dialogue with Homer (we can resort to Segre and with misconceived philological technicism call it “interdiscursivity”) offers to Vergil, the modern interlocutor, an institutional guarantee, but the dialogue only supplies the form of questions asked. The answers will have a completely new tone.

Manet must have felt himself moved by a similar claim to modernity, out of a comparable peremptory need for cultural and artistic renewal, when in the mid-nineteenth century he made the provocative choice of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* as the model for his *Olympia*: a reworking that imposed a disruptive comparison between two different languages, between two opposing forms of the world.¹⁴ It is an antiphrastic quotation, a quotation aiming to invert the significance of the model: philologists of the last century would have called the procedure *oppositio in imitando*. Manet persistently imitates the pose of Titian’s goddess, reproducing almost identically the mattress, the folded sheet and the curtain at the rear. Titian’s painting, commissioned as a wedding present and intended as an edifying example for the very young bride of the Duke of Urbino, should have celebrated the loving union in an allegorical form, a triumph of eroticism made chaste and reduced by its domestic setting. At the feet of the naked Venus a little dog is nestling, a symbol of marital fidelity; the goddess of love promises seduction and sensuality, but only as favours granted to the legitimate bridegroom.

In Manet’s picture the display of fidelity to Titian’s model makes us realize all the better the distortion of its significant features, in fact their inversion. Olympia represents a *femme de plaisir* who seems to challenge the

observer (a potential client?) with her shameless gaze; the flower in her hair and the ribbon collar of black satin are patches of colour, but also signs of everyday life bereft of allegorical abstraction. The willfully contemptuous pose, the left hand pressing on the womb (more to stress it than to hide it), and the slippers set out at her feet create a realistic atmosphere of worldliness, completely antithetical to the mythical sublimation that surrounds Titian's Venus. Titian's nurse, the goddess's faithful attendant, becomes in Manet a black servant who, like a procuress, passes a bouquet of roses to her mistress—a gallant tribute, one imagines, from some panting client kept waiting. The puppy crouched at the end of the bed is replaced by a black cat, conveying a quite different symbolic load. The warm and spreading colours of the renaissance Venus give place to a chromatic and luministic contrast, which also enters into the determined modernizing of Manet's great model: in fact, the ambiguity of tonal passages of white on white and black on black make it a provocative exercise in stylistic virtuosity. Not only the immorality of the subject but above all the innovative pictorial technique scandalized the Parisian public. Manet defended himself by claiming that his imitation intended to update the *Venus of Urbino*, and Zola wanted to intervene on his side with an exculpatory pamphlet.

This is the point. Modernizing the model inevitably demanded that it should be “actualized.” The imitator retrieves another man's design but must inevitably bestow on it meaning and values that are in harmony with his own sensibility. In fact, uprooted from their context, the elements preserved through imitation enter into another context, where they gain a new originality, whether of sense or of style. There is a verse of Homer which I have quoted several times in my past essays, for different purposes then, and I would like to excuse myself for resorting to it once more: πεντήκοντα ἔνεσαν θάλαμοι ξεστοῖο λίθοιο “there were fifty chambers wrought in well smoothed stone” (*Iliad* 6.244). It seems to me it can be useful here as an example of the way in which Virgil, as a modern poet, succeeds in stealing from Homer and at the same time imprinting on his theft the brand of his own unmistakable originality. In the *Aeneid*, at the heart of the narrative of the last night of Troy, in the midst of the raging slaughter Aeneas witnesses the assault on the palace of Priam, and the bridal chambers of the old king's daughters are revealed to his eyes: *Aen.* 2.503 *quingquaginta illi thalami, spes tanta nepotum*. Virgil's phrase is not just an open allusion, not just a quotation of Homer's words, but a transliteration—we call it a *calc* in the Latin tongue—of the same Greek sounds that had formed the first part of the verse in Homer: πεντήκοντα ἔνεσαν θάλαμοι ~ *quingquaginta illi thalami*. Up to the caesura of the verse, lexicon, sound and rhythm are practically identical, and it seems to the reader that he is hearing the reverberation of an echo; Homer lends his own voice to Virgil. But in the second half of the verse Homer writes ξεστοῖο λίθοιο, “of well smoothed stone.” Virgil is utterly different: *spes tanta nepotum*, “so great a hope of grandchildren.”

What began as an architectural detail, impersonal and refined in its objective physicality, now becomes a most lamentable note, a sympathetic and bitterly subjective intrusion, in which the modern poetics (*sentimentalisch*, as the German Romantics would have called it) that the poet has chosen are concentrated. The loss here is not just a deviation from the model, but rather a change of register, a leap from one system of reference to another. The extremely close contact that the two lines maintain with each other in their first half makes clear the painstaking nature of the harmonization achieved by the Virgilian imitation: the more the new text clings to Homer (and it could not do so more closely), the more the new voice re-echoes from it, modern and full of grief, reflexive and full of pathetic subjectivity. The dialogue between the two texts brings out all that Virgil has learned from Homer, but also everything that he himself wants to teach.

That imitation is also a form of challenge has long been obvious. But we are not saying that the challenger always wants to defeat the one he challenges. Indeed, most of the time he wants only the privilege of being able to measure himself against his rival, in a contest with two victors. The challenger is looking for recognition; his greatest ambition is to be able to reach parity with his predecessor, while preserving the proper differences.

Parody is utterly different in its intentions; it imitates but only to sabotage, to cheapen; in fact it is simply the parasitic form of imitation, submitting itself passively to the model, and limiting itself to caricature; in a word, it pretends rather than imitates. The motive of the parodist is quite the opposite of admiration, given that parody refuses to appropriate the text but burlesques it in a travesty. Sometimes its playfulness amounts to gentle teasing, and it can assume the guise of a complimentary *pastiche*; on other occasions it amuses itself by counterfeiting in a buffoonish fashion a “mannerism” or a conspicuous expressive feature. Parody is always malicious, when it is not outright spiteful: its most elementary technique consists in recasting as defects the very features which embody the artistic merits of a text or its most characteristic themes. Its weakness consists in its “vampire-like” behaviour; not being self-sufficient, it needs distinguished models in order to live at their expense, and for this reason exploits only traits that are easily recognizable because they are sanctified in the collective memory. Its (inevitable) failure consists of the increase in notoriety, and even authority, which it ends up conferring despite itself on the parodied text.

I mentioned parody because in spite of its different if not utterly opposed aims, the art of imitation shares with it some procedures in its intrusion upon the original. But one must consider that the imitator enjoys a freedom of action infinitely greater than the parodist; the imitator can transplant his model, or even cut it back or transform it, or at any rate tailor it to his own context. I stressed a moment ago a relevant feature of Virgil’s poetic form, that most carefully observed sense of the dignity of representation which is also a propriety of language: *decorum*, the *prepon* dear to Hellenistic poetics.

Such necessary observance of decorum is a reflex, or better a complementary factor of sublimity, of the *hypselon* which constitutes the dominant tone of the *Aeneid*. Properly speaking, its action operates “in the negative” inasmuch as it hampers from entering the text any form of either content or expression that tends to mutilate heroic dignity. In short, the actualization of models requires that they submit themselves to the restrictive rules which inspire the Roman poem. But the choice of the sublime is for Virgil both an ethical and aesthetic choice: it is not just a rejection of every low or shabby feature, but rather the attentive construction of a diffuse atmosphere of grandeur. Hence a strong *pathos* which impregnates the representation of heroic suffering: human grief is compensated by the virtue of endurance and a firm resolve of the mind. The humble things of daily life stay outside this horizon. In the Homeric narrative, things, objects, *la vita nella totalità quotidiana*, crowded the scene continually, filling it with plain and realistic details—it happened this way whether in the world of men or that of the gods; hence the representation of the miraculous and the divine was not exempt from material and concrete elements. In the *Aeneid*, on the contrary, the filter of *decorum* only lets through those aspects of the model that do not risk compromising the sublime.

A good example is provided by the contrast between two closely related scenes. In *Iliad* 18.369 ff. Thetis goes to Hephaestus to get the divine blacksmith to forge new weapons for her son Achilles, who has to return to battle.

And she found him turning and sweating among the bellows and busying around. . . .
 [410] He spoke, and panting the cripple raised himself from the bellows; limping, his thin legs trudged, and he put the bellows aside far from the forge, and gathered the instruments that he was using in a silver container; he wiped his face and both hands with a sponge, and his sturdy neck and hairy skin; he put on a tunic, took up a big stick and came out, limping...

Τὸν δ' εὖρ' ἰδρώοντα ἐλίσσόμενον περὶ φύσας
 σπεύδοντα ...

.....
 Ἥ, καὶ ἀπ' ἀκμοθέτοιο πέλωρ αἶητον ἀνέστη
 χωλεύων· ὑπὸ δὲ κνήμαι ῥώοντο ἄραιαι.
 Φύσας μὲν ῥ' ἀπάνευθε τίθει πυρός, ὄπλα τε πάντα
 λάρνακα· ἐς ἀργυρέην συλλέξατο, τοῖς ἐπονεῖτο·
 σπόγγῳ δ' ἄμφι πρόσωπα καὶ ἄμφω χεῖρ' ἀπομόργνυ
 αὐχένα τε στιβαρὸν καὶ στήθεα λαχνήεντα,
 δῦ δὲ χιτῶν', ἔλε δὲ σκῆπρον παχύ, βῆ δὲ θύραζε
 χωλεύων ...

In the *Aeneid* Venus too will need extraordinary weapons if her son Aeneas is to win the war against the Italians, and naturally she will have to request them from Vulcan. The fire-god comes down from the sky into the forges beneath the isle of Lipari, flanking the Sicilian coast. There the Cyclopes Bronte, Sterope and Pyracmon toil in an immense cave (*Aen.* 8.439 ff.).

"Drop everything," said the god Vulcan, "break off the tasks you have begun. Cyclopes of Etna, pay attention to me; weapons must be forged for an unconquerable man. Now we need strength, swift hands, now we need every skill in your art; make haste, no slacking!" He said no more. And they instantly all busied themselves and divided the task into equal parts. The bronze flows in streams and the golden metal and murderous iron melts in the enormous furnace. They shape an immense shield, sufficient alone to protect against all the missiles of the Latins, and they weld seven circles together with another seven. Some suck in and expel the air with the wind of the bellows; others dip the hissing bronze in water; the cave groans at the blows on the anvil. Some, with enormous strength, raise their arms together in rhythm and turn over the ore with strong pincers.

*"Tollite cuncta," inquit, "coeptosque auferte labores,
Aetnaei Cyclopes, et huc advertite mentem;
arma acri facienda viro. Nunc viribus usus,
nunc manibus rapidis, omni nunc arte magistra.
praecipitate moras." Nec plura effatus; at illi
ocius incubuere omnes pariterque laborem
sortiti. Fluit aes riuis aurique metallum
uulnificus chalybs uasta fornace liquescit.
Ingentem clipeum informant, unum omnia contra
tela Latinorum, septenosque orbibus orbes
impediunt. Alii uentosos follibus auras
accipiunt redduntque, alii stridentia tingunt
aera lacu: gemit impositis incudibus antrum
illi inter sese multa ui brachia tollunt
in numerum uersantque tenaci forcipe massam.*

Homer's Hephaestus is a sooty smith who bustles, hairy and sinewy, beating on the anvil and sweating in front of the oven-chimney; when he receives an important visitor he carefully puts away his tools, cleans himself up as best he can and puts on a fresh tunic, so as not to seem too ugly.

Virgil's Vulcan, on the other hand, is the god and lord of fire; the giant Cyclopes work for him and he orders them to forge Aeneas' armour; they alone are affected by toil and physical effort. In the *Aeneid* the gods have become superior beings who regulate the affairs of the universe; when they want to involve themselves in human affairs, they use intermediaries who act on their orders, demons or enslaved spirits. The Virgilian sense of *decorum* has detached them from the earthly world.

It is obvious that making Homer sublime requires the sacrifice of a conspicuous part of his totalizing imaginative vitality. We can use a metaphor and say that the multicoloured ancient statue has long since lost its vivid hues; the Roman renaissance must be content with the bare gleam of white marble—an impoverishment which nonetheless becomes in the *Aeneid* a choice for sobriety and composure.

This increase in theological dignity is not the only outcome of Virgilian straining towards the sublime, even if it is its most apparent feature. In the depth of this sublime nestles an utterly Roman sense of dignity and grandeur.¹⁵ But it functions also by exclusion, inasmuch as it ejects fabulous and surreal excesses from the narrative; the sublime would render itself futile

without a certain credibility in the facts related, without a reasonably sensible representation. That is why the Roman sublime, while it raises the level of characters, events and objects, also cultivates a calculated preference for the lifelike. Often the Homeric model would have appeared to Virgil outmoded to the point of losing decorum, to the point of being *aprepes*. One had to intervene and impose the standard of *decorum*.

Look what has become of Thersites, the hunchback limping fool of the *Iliad*, loud-mouthed and mean-spirited, malicious and boorish, the buffoon on whom the outraged Odysseus wields his scepter. Virgil found it useful to put on stage in the eleventh book (336 ff.) the figure of a dissident who disputed the decision of the princes in the assembly and proposed alternative motions, and Thersites was transformed into Drances the demagogue, opposed to the proud willfulness of Turnus. Although he is moved by jealousy and personal envy, he always defends the legitimate interests of the community and uses fairly correct arguments; he shows respect for the heroic valour of the enemy, Aeneas. In short, this is a negative personality, ready of tongue and clever in rousing the passions of the people, but he is not morally unworthy. The filter of *decorum* has stripped him of the vulgar (even comical) features of the Homeric model and integrated him into a unitary setting of dignified sublimity.

Let me cite one more example of the ways in which Virgilian imitation reduces everything in Homer that overdoes the quotidian, and shapes it to his own demands of moderation.¹⁶ While the battle rages between Greeks and Trojans over the corpse of Patroclus, Achilles wants to return to battle, but lacking his armour he tries to put his enemies to flight simply by showing himself and raising his well-known battle-cry. This unexpected apparition throws the Trojans into confusion (18.215–231):

Then Achilles dear to Zeus arose, and Athena threw over his strong shoulders the fringed aegis and she crowned his head with a gilded cloud; from his body there flashed a glittering blaze of fire. Just as when smoke rises to heaven rearing itself up far from a city on an island beset by the siege of enemies, and the besieged fight the whole day in a dread battle outside the city, and when the sun sinks the fires blaze up densely so that the neighbours see them and come with ships to save them; so from the head of Achilles a beam of light rose to heaven. He stopped on the trench outside the walls, but did not mingle with the Achaeans; he respected his mother's wise counsel. Here standing aloft he shouted, while Pallas Athene too shouted out; among the Trojans an immense confusion broke out.

Let us compare an episode from the tenth book of the *Aeneid*. Aeneas (who like Achilles had withdrawn, offended) now makes his reappearance after a long absence. He had been obliged to travel far away from the battlefield to make a treaty with Evander and with the Etruscans of lord Tarchon. On the flagship he was guiding the fleet of the allies; at the sight of him erect on the poop the besieged Trojans exult and the attacking Rutuli are dismayed (260–75). What the Trojans and Rutuli see is a metallic flash; the steel gleams from

Aeneas' helmet and his shield sends back waves of golden light (270–75).

The crest burns on his head and an ominous flame shot from his helmet, the golden shield sent out vast rays, just as at times on a clear night bloody comets glow a gloomy red, or the burning star of Sirius rises bringing thirst and disease to wretched mortals, and afflicts the sky with its light.

*Ardet apex capitit tristisque a uertice flamma
funditur et uastos umbo uomit aureus ignis;
non secus ac liquida si quando nocte cometae
sanguinei lugubre rubent, aut Sirius ardor
ille sitim morbosque ferens mortalibus aegris
nascitur et laeue contristat lumine caelum.*

There is nothing supernatural in the dismay that the apparition of Aeneas spreads among the Rutuli; there is no terrifying effect of Athena's aegis, no cloud of gold that casts frightful rays of light; the miraculous equipment that covered with dreadful flames Achilles' entire body has vanished. Virgil has made the whole scene realistic. He has rationalized it by eliminating every form of prodigy, every trace of the fabulous. The rays that accompany the arrival of Aeneas are naturally caused by the new armour forged by Vulcan, their gleam is the genuine shine of metal that reflects light. The Trojan hero terrorizes the Rutuli only because they see him returning, resolved to do battle. This is the result of a process of "secularization" that makes the glory and courage of Aeneas human, giving an earthly foundation to his valour. There is nothing in this scene foreign to his heroic character—a heroic character that was born in the world of myth but is making its way towards history.

Virgil's imitation of Homer, as you will have understood long since, oscillates between repetition and transformation. Most of the time the two procedures act simultaneously and belong to the same act of composition, and it would be difficult to separate them. It is the repetition that makes itself apparent most immediately. For example, the war in Latium between Trojans and Italians is often presented as a repetition of the war at Troy.¹⁷ But it is not a passive mirroring; at the beginning the Trojans find themselves besieged and near defeat, yet in the end they will be the victors, and Aeneas will kill Turnus, as Achilles killed Hector in the *Iliad*. In the new *Iliad* the Trojans are destined to win, as reparation for the destruction that their country has suffered; in the ethics of Virgil only the man who has suffered defeat acquires the right to the burdensome responsibility of victory. It is clear that the repetition is also an outdoing of Homer: the war, despite the struggle and suffering it entails, will take them not to destruction, but to the construction of a new unity.¹⁸

The second imitative procedure, that of transformation, is certainly less immediately perceptible than the other, even if it is more widespread. The reader who has the patience to analyse in depth on each occasion the elements that arise in the *Aeneid* from the rewriting of Homer also has access to the

secrets of Virgil's *modus operandi*. The transformation of the model moves in step with the pathetic intensification that the poet always imprints on his narrative, or more precisely with the "empathetic" elaboration that the narrative undergoes. Virgil does not remain aloof from events, but explores the state of mind of the persons in the action, giving voice to his own and their subjectivity; he looks at things from their point of view. He bestows luster on the events reported, either from outside by introducing unexpected *peripeteiae* and actions, or internally, by relating the sentiments and hardships of every character involved.

Still advancing the argument by means of comparisons, we now set the scene with Palinurus in the sixth book of the *Aeneid* (6.340–83) alongside the corresponding scene with Elpenor in the *Odyssey* (11.51–80).¹⁹ In Homer we have the grief of Odysseus and the bare words of Elpenor, who briefly recalls his misfortune and asks that his body be given a proper burial. In Virgil first and foremost there is the exposure of the ambiguous oracle (the "substitute sacrifice" of 5.815; *unum pro multis dabitur caput* "one life will be given in exchange for many"), then the grieving speech of Palinurus, who shows all the *ethos* of the faithful servant, followed by a pathetic narrative and the description of his actual suffering, and finally his prayer to be carried beyond the Styx. His prayer is rejected by the Sibyl ("do not expect to sway divine decrees with prayers"), but this is compensated by the reassuring promise that he will receive burial and his name will be preserved in the memory of all; a bitter consolation, conceded to another of the many innocent victims of Fate.

Chomsky's transformationalism—much superior to structuralism, which while effective in its functionalist description of language, usually showed itself minimally interested in problems of linguistic creativity—has put the accent on so-called *competence*, that capacity that allows the man who starts from a form of discourse to generate other forms equivalent to or resembling it. In this perspective the act of imitation is the outcome of a generative competence which starts from the models but then disassembles and reassembles them, welds them together and doubles them, manipulates them, and recombines them. In short, if we take this path it is clear that Homer for the *Aeneid* is not so much the object of imitation as the matrix of imitation, the productive generator of new realizations. Here is the reason why Virgil seeks a direct and agonistic relationship with Homer, a *vis-à-vis* that can never compare with his incidental retrieval of other models offered by Greek and Latin literature. However evident the traces left by the great Attic tragedies, by Apollonius Rhodius, by Ennius, Lucretius, Catullus and many other poets, imitation in these cases consists always of brilliant reminiscences, of evocative transplants, of leaping grafts; in these we are dealing with occasional *furta*, not all of them conscious. Homer alone is the subject of a constitutively different imitation, reserved only for him: his poems are plundered under the drive of a poetic intent that realizes itself in acts of appropriation. As we have heard Macrobius say, that the guiding idea was for

the *Aeneid* to be constructed *de Homeri speculo*; this such mirroring would have achieved the systematic incorporation of its model, but would have thrown into relief at the same time its continuing divergences from the model. With his poetic project Virgil seemed to want to appropriate above all a form, but behind the surface the reader was required to discover the insinuation, disruptive even if covert, of new contents, that is to say the proposal of other values and a different “form of the world.”

If we are to believe Flaubert and Aby Warburg, God is hidden in the details. I would like to summon a detail here in order to demonstrate to what extent, and with what minute persistence, Virgil has devoted himself to the imitation of Homer. In *Aen* 3.464, the seer Helenus loads the ships of Aeneas with gold, silver and other precious wares—“weighty gifts of old and wrought ivory” *dona dehinc auro gravia ac secto elephanto*. The clausula *secto elephanto* is stamped with the mark of Homer.²⁰ It is the calc of one of his formulaic clausulae (repeated twice in the *Odyssey* at 18.196 and 19.564): *πιστοῦ ἐλέφαντος*. Besides appropriating the words of his model, Virgil has stolen from Homer the very rare hiatus which separates the adjective from the noun here, a metrical *tour de force* which by itself denounces the thief and makes him a self-confessed offender. Certainly Virgil’s act is an exhibition of bravura, but (I hope I am not letting myself be caught in an impressionistic suggestion) I believe that the imitator this time did not want to mask or disguise his theft; instead he preferred to reproduce the model in its intangibility, contemplating it unchanged. A gesture of admiration and homage, it seems to me, more than the nonchalant gesture of a thief. Perhaps it is the gesture of a thief conveying his gratitude.

2A critical retrospective: method and its limits

I would like to attempt [...] to show how these displacements are displacements within a system, and thus entail a multitude of connections with the other elements of the system and with the entire linguistic culture of the corrector.

Gianfranco Contini 21

I could have given a fine title to this little book by naming it *Forty Years After*. In that case I would have parodied Alexandre Dumas's *Twenty Years After*, and even doubled it. In this sequel to *The Three Musketeers*, as we all know, the narrative is often veined with nostalgia; and even my new little book inevitably contains some wisps of nostalgia for *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, which I wrote just forty years ago. But I guarantee to the reader that I will keep under control every tendency to melancholy, exorcizing it on purpose with some polemical sallies. In fact that book of mine had embarrassingly good fortune, enough to generate a fallout of unwelcome followers who, while claiming to make good use of my arguments, often abused them, making me responsible for, if not complicitous in some of their intolerable interpretative deviations. "Blame Voltaire," said protesters against the revolution—but truly Voltaire did not have anything to do with it. Perhaps this is the right opportunity to reconstruct the cultural and methodological horizon which was dominant forty years ago and conditioned for better or for worse the elaboration of these old ideas.

Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario was published by Einaudi in 1974, 22 during the final years of structuralism. Indeed, structuralism had begun to celebrate its triumphs some decades since; the first samples of literary semiology had even taken form, and some philosophers and critics were already working on a "post-structuralism," which in fact did not aim to disprove the foundational principles of the doctrine, but even while starting from them – and contaminating them with Nietzschean impulses – was driving them to extreme theoretical consequences, to the point of disintegrating them in the direction of relativism. The Nietzschean grafts were actually poisoned – or better, wrenched arbitrarily from the system of thought to which they belonged rather than put into action with conscious awareness. Too bad for poor Nietzsche, accustomed to violations by fanatical interpreters; but the most serious damage afflicted literary criticism, which these

gentlemen actually wanted to advance.

But we will talk about all of this a little further on, when the text turns to polemic. For now let us reflect calmly on the happy encounter between structuralism (especially in the critical forms of literary semiology) and the nineteenth-century tradition of the study of historical philology (*Geistesgeschichte*), in which a late-idealistic framework was dominant, sporadically contaminated by residues of positivism and some incursions of Marxist historicism. A fine confrontation, that, in which the structuralist lesson certainly served to infuse literary research with a stronger methodological rigor. I am profoundly convinced of this, and would like to give my reasons (not without adding my honest reservations).

Now that structuralism's prime has long since passed, no one will want to bury it without ceremony; it has left the stage, but the teachings it left in its stead are in good health – and in many cases they have become useful acquisitions. It was not a philosophy, as some persons have believed. If we really want to, we could say that it was a minor philosophy, perhaps nothing more than a direction of thought. To its misfortune it won such universal support that it became almost a fashion, and this harmed it so much that fashionability brought on its obsolescence. Many disciplines made use of it; some were predisposed to take advantage of it, while others abused it to the point of violation. But if its status as doctrine was fairly weak, the procedures of its method were rigorous and effective. Above all structuralism had a talent for analysis. Indeed it knew how to put in evidence the elements of which every cultural artifact consists. It knew how to make explicit the functional relations which bind the single elements together in every complex formation. Its anti-historicist, anti-humanist and anti-existentialist appearance intimidated critics, and for this reason many honourable men opposed it. They actually came to fear that structuralism would have imprisoned History itself in aprioristic systems by denying it all autonomous liberty; they accused it of wanting to constrict into pale abstractions the vital variety of historical process, by its nature manifold and changeable, and congenitally beyond reduction.

This mistaken accusation was advanced by all those who at that time wanted to defend a late-idealistic conception of the human sciences (a conception which, one may well say, concealed, besides neo-romantic and anti-enlightenment prejudices, a theological vision of History). Against Historicism, which had a substantially “longitudinal” idea of reality—that is, it interpreted things in terms of development and evolution—the structuralists asserted a conception that we might call “transversal”; they interpreted reality itself as a relatively constant, or at least uniform, system of relationships. Following this trajectory, it was inevitable that they would also come to deny (or at least diminish) the autonomy of the subject: it is not we who think, but the thoughts that make us think; it is not we who speak, but the words that speak in us. If the various forms of humanism were all inevitably exposed to

being reproached as forms of subjectivism, one could always rely on the objectivity of the structure.

However, if we observe it from the present point of view, structure, even when it implies the idea of a system, is not at all an obvious system, one immediately visible. Rather, it is provided by the order which the various components take on inside the system. And in that internal order we should also include the transformations which the system undergoes. Here is a nodal point: history makes itself knowable through just these transformations, it is in them alone that the manifold effects of becoming make themselves visible. In short, despite the accusations of historicists, the structuralist project failed to preach a sort of Parmenidean immobility. The structuralists, being above all attentive to the correspondences set up thanks to synchronic analysis, obviously acknowledged diachronic movement, but for them temporal changes occurred only as transformations inside the system; they were nothing but oscillations within the limits imposed by the system itself. Precisely because the structure is a system of transformations, it controls itself by internal rules and preserves itself – and even enriches itself – thanks to the play of its transformations. Saussure illustrated the opposition between synchrony and diachrony by using the example of chess: during a game the arrangement of the pieces modifies itself with every move, but can be completely described by starting from the position in which every piece is found. To advance the game, it is unimportant to know at a given moment what moves have already been played, and in what order. The particular condition of the game represented by the arrangement of the pieces can be described synchronically, that is, without reference to the previous moves. Nevertheless there is a large dose of simplification in the radical nature of this abstract opposition: it is still true that the static conception of synchrony is a weakness of the first (orthodox) structuralism. In reality there cannot be a synchronic study without diachronic analysis; constant changes intervene in the system of an epoch. It even happens that we conceive synchrony in a dynamic fashion, since it is occupied by the germ of transformation.

I could have done without this very elementary sketch of structuralist thought, since it contains matters well known to all, but a malicious interest drove me on; I wanted my prefatory words in this chapter to have a partisan inclination. To prepare the reader I needed to stress these specific aspects of the structuralist legacy over others. I should only add, as a partial disavowal of the theoretical picture outlined above, that the very notion of structure has not always been given a stable definition, and in fact every single discipline which has taken inspiration from structuralism has emphasized only particular aspects of the theory, leaving in the shade those that were less productive for their own specific purposes. Their methods turned out in practice to be diversified because they were applied to different fields of research. For this reason it is difficult to give a uniform and comprehensive definition of what the structuralist method ought to be.²³ Rather it is proper to refer to a family

of methods; sharing a common stock at base, and often sharing some polemical purposes as well, these practical procedures varied according to circumstances. Every discipline – linguistics, anthropology, literary criticism and philology – had its own habits and interests which were obviously conditioned by the specific demands of its content. Consequently every method ends by finding the tools best suited to the job, rehabilitating and adjusting from time to time its own traditional critical workshop.

Linguistics was the vanguard, and linguists above all were the theorists of novelty, starting with the patriarch Saussure. More than two thousand years of refined meditation on questions of language had prepared the soil, making it particularly receptive to methodological innovations. So it fell to linguistics to elaborate a toolbox of efficient analytical instruments, and only linguistics succeeded in hewing out a scientific, we might say, profile. Structuralism could not (nor would it have been able to) give the status of science to every one of the disciplines which traced themselves back to it; it could only inspire slightly better-organized analyses that would go beyond the accidental nature of single *ad hoc* observations. If analysis is the critical method that teaches us to disassemble an organic whole into its constituent parts, and then describe the parts and show their relations with the whole, then analysis certainly should have been the first stage of each structuralist exploration. The theoretical foundation presupposed was that language was a system, and the value of every element in this system was determined by the total sum of differences which distinguished it from all the other elements. Inseparable from the notion of system was the idea that the constitutive elements were interdependent and had developed in each case specific functions subordinated precisely to the system.

This was the fundamental theoretical equipment (system, structure, function), but occasionally a set of subordinate concepts intruded, often studded with technical terms like “opposition,” “contrastivity,” “synchrony,” “diachrony,” “denotation,” “connotation,” “code,” “paradigm,” “transformation.” Linguistics gladly lent its critical lexicon to other disciplines, some affine, some remote, but in any case all eager to work with instruments that would appear less vague and more exact, rigorously defined and thus more reliable in their application. In particular the consanguinity that bound structural linguistics and semiology to formalistic criticism was soon evident; so it came to pass that research into the form of expression in literary texts was a field of work common to linguists and philologists—common but not undifferentiated. For linguists, language is an autonomous object of research; they observe it, seek out its rules, describe its functioning, and are interested above all in its potentiality of meaning. On the other hand, for philologists – as interpreters and critics – language exists only when it is already realized in texts and does not demand to be considered outside those concrete textual achievements. Their own activity is bound up in these texts: *hoc opus, hic labor est*.

In short, the practical demands of philology, rather than the sallies *extra moenia* of linguists, soon precipitated a divorce and each discipline freely took up its own path. Contact and methodological overlap had, however, enriched with new stimuli the critical study of literary texts, thus opening up advantageous perspectives. It is not unhelpful to recall that while there were many changes which interested the sciences of humanity as a whole, perhaps the most important outcome was the appearance of theories that explicitly touched on materials and themes previously considered only from a historical point of view. It was then that, after ending the dictatorship of various historicisms, every discipline (linguistics, literature, philology) came to divide itself into two distinct approaches, one theoretical and one historical. These approaches seemed at the time to be opposed, but then successfully made themselves complementary. I even believe that, while reducing its absolute hegemony, History has to some extent safeguarded its role (at least in the panorama of Italian literary studies); it renounced the pretence of being the *passe-partout* capable of opening every lock of the cultural edifice and has accepted with reasonable good humor being simply one critical component alongside the others.



I would like the brief statement of Gianfranco Contini which serves as epigraph to this second chapter to be an homage to my great teacher, but I also want to bring explicitly into the light one of the cardinal ideas that provoked forty years ago my studies on “arte allusiva” and on the memory of classical poets. In Contini’s brisk phrasing the concept of “system” stands out clear and categorical: in the criticism of variants, every correction introduced by the author into his own text enters into a whole body of contextual relations; the equilibrium of the system adjusts itself to accommodate the change and produces each time a new structural arrangement. Benedetto Croce in a polemical spirit baptized this type of literary research the “criticism of discards” (“critica degli scartafacci”).²⁴ Contini reclaimed the pejorative formula and even proudly used it as a title for his own method.²⁵ The fact is that Croce’s criticism, born from a principle of absolute formalism, could not stoop to compromise with form understood in material terms; he made no concessions to the concreteness and physicality of expression but answered to a rigorously formal aesthetic in which form was made to preserve a purely ideal character. Croce’s criticism was for this reason obliged to develop uniquely by dwelling on the sense of content, the sense of its harmony and congruence—that sense which in every poet was identified as the guiding motive, dominating the work. Hence the almost complete lack in Croce of any nuance of a technical kind, of any linguistic analysis, of any respect (not to mention any hint of admiration or enjoyment) for particular effects of style – in short, a complete lack of interest in the philology of the literary text, and open disparagement of the activity of philology as well.

Given that the act of intuition is for Croce purely ideal, and the work of art is already perfect in itself, idealistic doctrine sees itself as entirely alien to empiricism. Written poetry, the painted picture, music translated into notes, are all projections of the ideal work onto a medium, and do not belong to its creation but to its communication. Contini, on the contrary (it is difficult for him to be post-Crocian without becoming anti-Crocian) believes above all in empiricism, and does not admit that the act of intuition is purely ideal, nor that the work of poetry is already perfectly brought to completion in the very moment in which its idea is confronted.²⁶ He maintains that written poetry is not just communication but creation itself, or at least that it is creation comparable to that of the Platonic demiurge: it is the work of an artisan, someone who shapes the material and works on its form. Criticism of the author's variants is based on this artisanal (or craftsmanlike) aspect of poetic activity. Critics who like Croce are anchored to the idea of poetry as a business of "contemplation" will also be able to continue believing in a distinction between poetry and non-poetry and imagining that a poetic work is, like Athena inside Zeus's head, ready to leap out fully armed, a divine prodigy that is born already achieved. If aesthetic criticism considers the poetic text a value, for the philologist of "discards" it is instead a perpetual approximation towards value.

Contini is interested in form, but not in its resolution into formalism or self-satisfied aestheticism. He sees poetry as an elaboration of the verbal material, as a stratification or modification of textual elements, as a process of formation. For him the poet is an *operarius* (workman) endowed with talent – and by "talent" I am designating that special capacity which the Romantics would call "genius" and which in reality is an aptitude that combines intelligence and imagination, but also meditation and calculation. This conception of poetry as industriousness activates a sort of correspondence – I would say collaboration – between the poet and the critic, who are fraternally united by a common experience of industry; the critic (he too is an *operarius* who employs logical instruments) becomes a sort of deputy in the poet's workshop.

Criticism based on variants was subsequently destined to have important resonances in editorial practice, even becoming a relevant part of the equipment of modern philologists and editors. But, as I said before, with respect to my work of forty years ago, nothing was more instructive than Contini's conception of the text as "system." In this respect Contini was a precursor of the early attempts at structuralism, a forerunner of critical experiments that were already incubating; the dynamic of his "criticism of discards" seems, in fact, to have been profoundly modified by the idea that author's variants had a structural function in relation to all the elements of the text. This seemed to me an exemplary idea that could be fruitfully transferred to research (which I was just beginning) on poetic memory, on allusions between texts, and on literary imitation in general; I quickly realized that in

keeping with this same principle, every poet, in order to appropriate his so-called “sources,” had to transform them into functional elements within the structure of his own text, the text that was just then welcoming them.

Typically the old hunt for sources (*Quellenforschung*, in which classical German philology has exercised absolute domination, under the influence of positivistic science emerging from the heart of nineteenth-century historicism) had rediscovered in literary texts, but in a casual and disorganized way, countless reminiscences of detail. This exercise was virtually an end in itself: instead of inquiring whether or to what extent the sources identified had integrated themselves into the structure of individual works, the source-hunters had prepared accurate enumerations of imitation and borrowings – all useful for gaining an understanding of the cultural formation of an author and his literary and linguistic conditioning,²⁷ but insufficient in themselves if one wanted to apprehend the effective poetic structure of the works under examination. Contini, rather, based his critical method on premises of a decidedly unitary – I would even call it organic – stamp: the text, defined precisely as a system, is for him a device, a complex mechanism, and for this reason is subordinated to all the laws governing a mechanism, such as its functional efficiency, its tendency to equilibrium, and the principle of the interaction of parts.

To me this criterion seemed decisive. From this starting point, however, I was able to take one further step forward. It was not only the individual poetic text that constituted a system: in the eyes of each new poet, the entire body of the Graeco-Roman literary tradition itself constituted a system. It was actually an articulated repertory of texts committed to common memory; forms, phrases, and discourses, precipitated in different times and cultures, still offered themselves *synchronically* at the moment of a new creation. Thus it comes to pass that in the folds of every text are concealed a plurality of other texts, indeed countless models; rather than hidden, the tradition is masked behind new language which covers it with its own weighty presence. This tradition, if one wants to think of it as a map, is like a road-map with labels indicating regions and places, more or less distant, set here and there in space (and time); it is a myriad of preceding developments, of gradual transformations, of innumerable precursors which reduplicate themselves on each occasion. But tradition is also the necessary vehicle for the new element, the pharmacological substance (as it were) with which the invented medication is compounded in order to administer it more efficiently.

From another aspect, it is tradition that is presupposed in literary legibility; in fact the sense and structure of a work cannot be apprehended without relating them to certain models, themselves excavated from a long series of texts of which they are in some sense the recurring constants. Outside this system the poetic work would not be intelligible; its correct reception requires the reader to possess a good *competence* in deciphering the literary language, a capacity derived from practical knowledge of a

multiplicity of texts. This is how the reader of a poetic work – who advances along the surface of the text – finds himself caught up in a dialectical movement that forces him to dive beneath this verbal appearance and exposes him to a dialogue with other submerged voices. This dialogue spurs him to gather traces or superimpositions, to measure the originality of the text which he is reading, and to include it in a typology and so recognize it as a new species of a known genus. In short, an interlocutory model of the relationships between texts is far superior to the customary conception of “influence,” which is too superficial and decisively insufficient to define the systematic relations that bind different texts from the same tradition.²⁸ One must keep in mind that the classical practice of imitation is also an invitation to a double reading of texts, an invitation to decipher their relationship with their models; the styles of reading in every epoch are also implicit in their styles of writing. In this sense literary works are never simple memories, but rewrite their reminiscences; we might say paradoxically – if we must preserve this term – that they “influence” their predecessors, inasmuch as they modify them and redetermine their relevance within the body of the tradition.

It is obvious how widely such a perspective differs from the much blamed (but too severely, let us admit) “source criticism.” The latter was the point of departure of Giorgio Pasquali’s essay on *Arte Allusiva*. But he aimed to distinguish himself from it. The bitter polemics which between the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth had set the positivists of the “historicist school” in Italian literary criticism (above all romance philologists from Carducci to d’Ancona, from Raina to Mussafia, from A. Bartoli to E. Novati) in opposition to the priests of pure ecstatic poetry, like E. Thovez and G.A. Cesareo, still cast a long shadow. The accusation brought by the latter scholars against their adversaries was that of arid and suffocating “philologism.” The crime (unpardonable in their eyes) was “treason against poetry.”²⁹ Even Croce had entered into the dispute,³⁰ and if he had little sympathy with positivist research into sources, he had even less for the hunt for “plagiarisms” conducted by Thovez and his disciples; in questions of literature he did not seem at all inclined to accept allegations of plagiarism presented in a moral context (from the beginning the stumbling block had been the poetic work of Gabriele d’Annunzio, marked by constant plundering and often bejewelled with lexical thefts). Taking a different point of view, the philosopher of idealistic historicism declared it was important “to have an exact awareness of the way in which art and science really had evolved, and of sources and tributaries that are an integral part of their genesis.”³¹ In short, is it good to know those sources; they are elements of history.

Croce’s disagreements were nonetheless resolutions of the questions; and so also with the romance philologists who confronted each other afterwards (E.G. Parodi, F. Torraca, C. De Lollis, M. Barbi), “source criticism,” made more articulate and lively, found a new footing. But the discrediting mortgage

that weighed on the studies (long since mocked as “crenological” or “fontanological,” without acrimony but in a condescending tone) had not been entirely repaid. Pasquali knew this, or at least felt it, as if it were a congenital vice of philology, or at least a weakness that had to be excused. In fact, he began his celebrated essay of 1942, *Arte allusiva*, in muted tones: he was conscious that the accumulation of references to the sources of a poet could turn out to be a diminution, either for the interpreter or the poet himself. His few pages represented a decisive aboutface in philological studies and opened up new critical horizons. To the notion of sources, a determinist and rather mechanical notion, he added intentionality via the notion of “allusion,” whereby the poet allowed the model supplied by another author to show through a fraction of his own text and appealed to the reader’s memory to identify it. A collaboration *à deux*, created out of open complicity. From the poet’s and reader’s “learned” inheritance the same poetic idea leapt out; one evoked it, the other was summoned to recognize it.

I was aiming to continue on this path. I studied literary allusion and its mechanisms, but ended by forcing myself in another direction; I intended to examine first and foremost the structural function that literary memory (whether active or unconscious) regularly exercises in the creation of texts. Source criticism and even Pasqualian allusion attributed the creation of the text to a relationship between two subjectivities, concentrating on the personalities of the authors compared and not on the objective construction of the texts. I put the accent on the text as structure, rather than on the author, because I wanted to minimize a frequent risk in the criticism of imitations: some people believe they ought always to recognize behind each textual similarity the intentionality of a literary subject, the effort of an author completely focused on indicating his own capacity for emulation. I also tried to show that the art of allusion does not work differently from rhetorical figures, from tropes, and that its function in poetic language is no different from that performed by a figure. We might say (indeed I must have said this somewhere) that *denotation*, or the “proper” significance of the alluding text, loads itself through *connotation* with an “improper” significance, which is that of the text allusively recalled: this is an increment of meaning like the one produced by a metaphor.³²

As far as I am concerned, I aimed, by insisting on the concept of a literary system and invoking the analogy of the rhetorical figure, to purify the concept of imitation from every excess of intentionalism. Rather than privileging the moment of the poet’s subjective engagement, I was giving value to the impersonal and generic moment of literary tradition. After all, insisting on the creative subject and its autonomy would appear to be at odds with the mentality and practice of the ancients. The great merit granted to codifications, genres, institutional languages, artistic conventions and so on, ends in reality by drawing closer to the real conditions in which classical literature was produced. It seems to me that there was in all this a critical

profit. All imitations, even those that might seem not to be casual, were described as ways in which the literary text functions. Obviously one had to recognize a gradation between the various possible forms of imitation, from the strong intentionality of the art of allusion to the casual recurrence of the most indistinct memory. Nonetheless this was a homogeneous picture, and the problem of practicing imitation found a unitary solution here. It was the tradition, not the poets, that gave voice to literature; that is, literature was controlled by the dominant system of tradition.

Now I must commit an *auto-da-fé* that does not aim to be a recantation but the simple acknowledgment of a single mistake of mine. Following the guidelines of structuralism, which had taught me to give value to the objectivity of literary procedures, and out of love for theoretical coherence, I neglected the undeniable burden of intentional subjectivity that the art of allusion, in contrast to other forms of imitation, brought with it. I did not deny it, but neither did I stress it, as I should surely have done; this was my sin of omission. The disappearance of the author and of his predominance in literature, was the toll that structuralism paid to the aversion for idealism that was in command at the time, and I paid the same generational tribute. Powerful in the moment of analysis (and therefore fruitful for the work of philologists), structuralism was a weak instrument for the comprehensive evaluation of the literary artifact. Structuralism, capable of dismantling the text into its components, and of describing its functioning and perceiving its interactions, still risked enclosing its sense in neutral schemes, ordered but perhaps apathetic. It fetishized the text, but it left the reader and his emotions outside. Or better, the reader became a function of the text, he became part of the fetish. Formalism had already been mistrustful of the empirical reader, and New Criticism had already denounced “the affective fallacy,” which was due to “the intentional fallacy.” This was the verdict of the two spiritual fathers Wimsatt and Beardsley: “Affective illusion is a confusion between the poem and its consequences, between what it *is*, and what it *does*.”³³ (But it would be fair to ask oneself the question, “Aren’t texts written to be read, to provide enjoyment and emotional effects?”)

Let us return to the intentionality of the art of allusion; there is no doubt that it is an inalienable prerogative of the Author (and even of the programmed reader obliged to decipher it). But a decisive factor had intervened: the very importance that structuralist theory attributed to the special quality of the literary text – to literariness – had brushed away all the author’s intentions; the author had become the black beast of the “new course,” the unwelcome symbol of humanism, of subjectivism and of various psychologies that structuralism wanted to exclude from literary studies. The anti-intentionalism of structuralists could be so radical because it was confident in the self-sufficiency of language, without any reservations; they maintained that the meaning of a text was determined not by the author’s intentions but by the system of language, that system on which the literariness

of the text and of the poetic tradition was founded. Obviously, calling into dispute the intentions of the Author called into dispute all the counter-conceptions of theory.

I have already said that structuralism gave me something, but took from me something else. It gave me rigor in the study of imitation, it helped me to subordinate the various cases of intertextuality to a unitary and organic process, it suggested to me that the text (we might say, the whole culture) is nothing but a tissue woven from continuous citations, deductions, evocations – some visible, other imperceptible, all inevitably rooted in tradition. But note also what it took from me. If the literary work has two poles – the artistic and the aesthetic – the artistic pole is nothing other than the author's written text; and in interpreting it, as I have said before, structuralism was a quite effective instrument. But the aesthetic pole, the realization entrusted to the cooperative intelligence of the reader, was debased. And this was a step backward in comparison with what the positivist and the idealist philology had always known. Idealism in all its variants recognized, more or less, that the meaning of the text was transmitted to the reader by the author (to whom, however, all the responsibility for signifying was assigned), and for that reason did not ignore the fact that literature inevitably found its realization in reading.

But even if we reason in rigorously structuralist terms, the reclaimed autonomy of the text would somehow have been obliged to leave some space for the reader – the person who “constructs” the meaning of the text at the moment when he understands it, the person who sets in motion a meaning planned to communicate and not just to exist autonomously. However that may occur, it is clear that the reader must be considered an integral part of this process. It was a serious failure of orthodox structuralism not to pay due attention to him. If structuralism was disturbed by the subjectivism of the Author, the holder of intentions deceptive and impossible to grasp, it was equally disturbed by the subjectivism of the Reader, free to hold interpretations too often unverifiable. Indeed, to decipher the intentionality of an imitation, what could the reader do except risk seeking out the psychological motivation? Would it be a tribute paid by one poet to another? Could it be a parody, or even a counterpoint? Or might it instead be an emulatory improvement on the model? Given these doubts, would it not be better to exercise some restraint and bring out *objectively* the relationship between the texts, and note the verifiable grafting of precipitated memories?

But this issue of intentionality is a problem, whether for a partisan of subjectivist criticism or for his opponent. I, who always believed in the intentionalist character of the art of allusion, and who affirm my regret at not having sufficiently emphasized its special status (as I could easily have done), am still not so sure that intentionality is the decisive criterion for judging allusion as a case different from other forms of intertextuality. If I am allowed a jesting comparison, I feel a bit like Galileo, who when he was forced to deny the Copernican hypotheses in order to escape jail, even as he adjusted

his thinking in accord with the prescribed immobility of earth, is supposed to have murmured to himself, “And yet it moves!”

But I will provide an instructive example to encourage everyone to form less drastic and better articulated opinions. The example is so close to undecidability that it could stand as an intercessor on behalf of my past uncertainty. At the beginning of the second book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas tells Queen Dido about the last night of Troy and the reversals suffered during his voyage as an exile. He opens his apology with this verse:

“O queen, you ask me to renew unspeakable sorrow.”

Infandum, regina, iubes renouare dolorem.

These first words to Dido closely recall (critics have never missed it) the exordium of one of Odysseus’ fables at the court of the Phaeacians. He too turns to a queen, here Arete, wife of Alcinoo (Od. 7. 241):

“O queen, it is difficult to tell you, one by one, my misfortunes.”

ἀργαλέον, βασιλεια, διηνεκέως ἀγορεύσαι
κήδεα ...

The coincidence of situation – the proem to a painful narrative told to a queen who persuades the guest to speak out, in one case Arete, in the other Dido – allows Virgil to effect an echo. The poet of the *Aeneid* keeps his distinguished model in mind and *intentionally* alludes to it. The reader is invited to collaborate in the recalling of the verse, and to recognize the resemblances between the two texts in order to appreciate the variations more fully. Virgil has stolen a conspicuous phrasing from Homer (and has made no effort to conceal his theft) but he has infused it with a strongly pathetic intonation. The connotation of suffering echoing in the adjective *infandum* is enough, in contrast with the bare denotation of the Greek adjective, to transform the verse. But there is more. Aeneas’ speech is a painful reactivation (*renouare*) of his subjective suffering, not just an objectively stressful narrative of misadventures and misfortunes, as in the words of Odysseus. What really surprises the reader is to discover how Virgil has achieved this new intonation while fully respecting the materiality of the Homeric verse. The exterior similitude is impressive: there is faithful correspondence in the word order (ἀργαλέον, βασιλεια ~ *infandum, regina*), and the same metrical and rhythmical cliché gives form to the sequence. Let us stop here and pass to another verse that we can put alongside it; then we will draw conclusions from the double comparison, but they will not be easy conclusions.

In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, the book of the dead, Aeneas meets Dido’s shade and swears solemnly that it cost him great suffering to separate from her (458–60): “O queen, I swear by the stars, by the gods above, and by whatever faith there is in the depths of earth, that I left your shore against my will.”

... per sidera iuro,
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,
inuitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.

The memory of a very different oath had occurred to Virgil, an oath dedicated to a very different situation. Callimachus had written a delightful courtier's poem to celebrate Berenice, the young queen of Egypt, who offered a lock of her hair as a vow to guarantee the return of her groom Ptolemy from a campaign; the lock disappeared from the temple in which it was dedicated, to reappear in the heavens as a new constellation. Catullus made a most elegant translation of *The lock of Berenice*.³⁴ In his text the lock, having risen among the stars, turns to the queen and swears to her in these words (66.39 ff.): "Against my will, O Queen, did I leave your head, against my will; I swear it by you and your own head."

inuita, o regina, tuo de uertice cessi,
inuita: adiuro teque tuumque caput!

Virgil's imitation, despite very slight adaptation, is an integral transplant; the allusion to Catullus' line is featured, it is an *intentional* display of theft. That is clear. But the function of the imitative relationship is not clear. If we want to hew to the objective facts of the text, we can note an obvious difference of register between the model and its reuse; in Catullus everything is committed to the jesting incongruence between the gravity of the pathetic tone and the lightness of the theme (a drama of a lock swept up among the stars!); but in Virgil the sublime register of the oath is absolutely in keeping with the bitter pain of the sentiments expressed.³⁵ But what can be said in connection with the intentions of the imitator? There is only the path of subjective happenstance (which lies exposed to the subjectivity of the Author and the subjectivity of the Reader). Must we think that Virgil is "criticizing" and correcting Catullus? Or believe that Catullus was more serious and more emotional than he appears to us? Or will it be possible to hypothesize (alas!) an ironic touch in Aeneas' self-defence? One of these hypotheses is absurd, another reasonable, but both are too inclined to reconstruct the poet's implied thoughts. The fact remains that Virgil appropriated from Catullus, producing a verse of most splendid artistry and so fitting to the pathetic grieving of the context, that it makes us repeat here what Macrobius (as we saw above) said in general about Virgil's imitative artistry: "we see in amazement that the parts going back to other poets sit better in Virgil than in their original place."

Let us start lining up the conclusions. We have seen that the hemistich *infandum, regina, iubes* (cut off by the hepthemimeral caesura) is in close correspondence with Homer's hemistich; indeed, it is as it were a *natural* memory, inasmuch as it refers back to a openly analogous narrative situation, namely the opening of Aeneas' personal account to queen Dido, which is perfectly parallel to that of Odysseus to queen Arete. If we believe in the poet's intentionality we ought to say that the allusion is directed to the latter –

the Homeric model.

The first possible conclusion, then, is that Virgil had Homer's verse in mind and has retained the fixed metrical and verbal pattern that gives form to the hemistich *inuitus, regina, tuo*. But this hemistich, as we saw, is the first part of the line *inuitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi*, which repeats (with strong allusive power and hence, as we should believe, with open intentionality) the Catullan verse *inuita, o regina, tuo de uertice cessi*. Hence the second possible conclusion is that what Virgil had in mind was the line of Catullus, and he wanted his reader to recognize it. The "intentionalists" would have set to work, with extenuating and opposing efforts, to determine which was the originally predominant model, and from which direction the blessed "inspiration" had come to Virgil. But there is a third possible conclusion, one rather more aporetic. We should seek, rather than feeling hesitant about the intentionality of an allusion, the path of objective observation and stick to phenomenological forms of relief. In short, we should be readers who see poetic reminiscence as *an effect of the text*, offered by the text to all comers, and who in reading gather echoes, admire transformations, and are surprised by gains in meaning. Paradoxically we will find in these exercises of imitation the most persuasive test of a great poetic originality. One cannot answer such a proposition better than did Eugenio Montale when he said: "the right kind of originality... is not what does not resemble anything; *it is what persists in being irreducible to resemblances* and what is guaranteed and conditioned by them."³⁶

Before dropping entirely my (reluctant) palinode on the Author's possible intentionality when he consciously alludes to a foreign text, I shall yield to the temptation to propose one more example. My malicious objective is to make the problematic picture which I have outlined even more complex. Doubts usually bring me more benefit than certainties. In one of the best known (and most precious) poems of Carducci, *Traversando la Maremma toscana*, the poet derived a hendecasyllable from a sonnet of Petrarch (*Rerum uulgarium fragmenta*, 301, v. 9) and framed it in full view in his own text:

ben riconosco in te le usate forme

Petrarch's sonnet is a song for Valchiusa, the cherished landscape of woods and streams, the silent scenario of the poet's lament for his beloved Laura. The first verse of the first *terzina* sounds very much like that of the imitator:

ben riconosco in voi le usate forme

Carducci too wandered in a melancholy mood through a beloved landscape, and we expect that he would have been pleased to have appropriated so happily this verse of Petrarch. But that is not so. In fact, he wrote in a letter to a friend: "the fifth line is by Petrarch, but it won't go away."³⁷ His intention, if we want to talk of intention, was rather to "get rid of" this verse, to transform

it, to make it at all costs sufficiently different. But intentions do not count: this line emerging from the depths of his memory, transmigrating as if by its own uncontrollable nature, grafts itself magnificently into the new composition. That the entire poem of Carducci was under the impact of a nostalgic memory bound to a landscape only too dear, as was already true of Petrarch's sonnet, explains why the *revenant* presented itself to the mind of the poet and then would not go away again.³⁸

In short, it is risky to seek in the text the conscious action of the author; his intention, whether reflexive or calculated, may be ambiguous, fleeting, often cheating. On the other hand, to discover models, both those voluntarily sought out and those involuntarily experienced, can tell us something more verifiable about the poet's creativity, if not his consciousness: his tastes, his assimilated reading, the mnemonic workshop of his texts.



I said earlier that I would dedicate a few words to deploring the excesses of some enthusiastic disciples who, starting from *Memoria dei Poeti* or from the English version contained in *The Rhetoric of Imitation* have, in my opinion, distorted or outright denatured the critical framework that I was proposing. Rather than defend my ideas, I would like to defend the method, or better, to clarify its inviolable limits – inviolable because, if they are not respected, the method itself loses its validity. This is not an expression of personal resentment, indeed personally I am very content that someone is trying to muscle forward, that is to say advance the investigation of literary imitation and intertextuality. It is not the novelty that alarms me. What alarms me is that step by step, new presuppositions, reasonably motivated but free of all control, have actually assailed the fundamental criteria of textual analysis and in the end have fatally compromised the criteria themselves.

Structuralism, as I said before, quickly entered a crisis. Its fundamental acquisitions were certainly welcomed with agreement, but they lacked the doctrinal antibodies that would have immunized them against some external contagions, which, although they could all be grouped under the heterogeneous label of post-structuralism, soon altered the primitive nucleus of its theory. The first phase of systematic structuralism, what we might call its orthodox form, founded on the objectivity of the text and the autonomy of language, had known how to inspire rigorous and fruitful studies in philology. But the happy marriage soon ended. It ended when certain currents of thought grafted themselves onto these theoretical bases: they answered to philosophical dicta foreign to the craftsmanlike empiricism of philology. Instead they celebrated irrationalism, unsystematic thought and the uncertain significance of the text. It was a mass assault, concentric even if scattered. Gadamer's hermeneutics (in his relationship to Heidegger), the post-modernism of Lyotard, the deconstruction of Derrida, the psychoanalytic suggestions of Deleuze, the "irony" of Rorty, arrived from different fronts to

put in question the very idea of truth, or at least the idea of truth in its capacity as self-evident.

All these ideas that we could almost define as nihilistic (or at least relativistic) have long since exhausted themselves and have remained fruitless. Indeed, for some time a new hunger for “sense” has been noticed, a renewed confidence in the concrete nature of language. Thus it may raise a smile that I should abandon myself to this unrestrained tirade against the betrayal of post-structuralism, now that Hannibal is no longer at the gates and it is no longer useful to raise alarms. But that is not the problem. It is simply that the venerable centuries of philological studies, as well as their academic and scholastic nature, have often discouraged rapid innovation, thus condemning our studies to the delayed utilization of methods that in other fields of knowledge were already sinking into darkness. This is just what was seen and can still be seen in some recent works of philology dedicated to imitation and intertextuality. Their authors still keep each other busy with post-structural inventions, urged on by the shared illusion that they are the critical avant-garde.

Others before me have thundered in indignation at these fantastic inventions, but unfortunately they have done so as if the ideas that animated them were only the foolishness of clueless fellows, fantasies unworthy of even the least consideration.³⁹ The indignant protesters did not want to understand that behind these scandalous propositions stood critical principles respectable and well motivated in themselves, even if they were neither appropriate nor acceptable; their criteria of evaluation were quite different but all were equally deserving of a discussion free of contempt and worthy of deliberate refutation. It should be clear to everyone that conformist thinking is worse than error.

At the root of the position of post-modernists, hermeneuticists and deconstructionists lies the famous and so often discussed phrase of Nietzsche, unfortunately misunderstood and arbitrarily isolated from the context of his comprehensive work; according to him: “there are no facts, but only interpretations.”⁴⁰ This is the stumbling block, a condemnation of positivism as guilty of limiting itself only to bare phenomena. But Nietzsche was not proposing the negation of truth.⁴¹ He was a veteran philologist who believed in facts, as he repeated many times (especially in the last years of his life when he was justifying the honesty and courage of the seekers after truth and declared error to be the expression of baseness).⁴² So he kept truth and suspicion in tension (which accordingly, let us mention in parenthesis, is the mental habit that should guide the good philologist).

Hermeneuticists and deconstructionists have adhered variously to the “linguistic turn” promoted by structuralism. But they have driven themselves too far, to the point of endangering its fundamental principles. In fact they have denied, in partial agreement with each other, that any autonomous reality can exist outside language and the text. Then they took another step, even more decisive, in affirming that all our forms of knowledge are oriented by a

sort of foreknowledge blended from uneliminable prejudices (Gadamer in particular): this is how the overcoming of structuralist orthodoxy finally compromised the very faith in objectivity that structuralism at its dawn had polemically championed against idealistic subjectivism. Thus it appeared totally normal to deny credit to language and its power of signifying things. The meaning of a text, once cut off from its roots, no longer depended on the rules of literary signification; it was instantly usurped by the Reader, who subjected it to his own unbridled inventive power. Philology suffered from this above all else. As a science of verification and inquiry, but also an art of interpretation of concrete and positive data, philology often had to weather the invasions of incautious critics, and became a field of exercise for many unfounded inferences.

The fact is that the devotees of classical literatures have not always familiarized themselves in depth with the critical anxieties of post-structuralist critics; they have eavesdropped on their postulates without forming a full awareness of the implications which their crisis entailed. Otherwise they would have been able to resist the contagion. They have vaguely followed the new doctrinal principles (that is my opinion) without, however, understanding the risks associated with them. Certainly that is a consequence of the psychological insularity of classical studies, a discipline which rarely acts as a protagonist in conflicts and cultural changes. Mostly it reacts to change, and always with some delay. Rarely do its members take the initiative. They did so once in the Romantic era, and from this was born an extraordinary stage of criticism, extraordinary for every literature and all philology; the reason for this exception is that the texts of Greek and Latin classicism themselves were on this occasion the central object of an impassioned dispute which proved highly innovative for the entire culture.

In its extensive history classical studies has experimented with everything, but its position has almost always been one of aristocratic restraint; on the one hand, it has an enclosed inheritance, a monumental legacy to protect; on the other, it possesses severe and cautious methods of study capable of guaranteeing a curated celebration of this inheritance: a history and a perspective inspired, in short, by an intelligent defence. It is astonishing that now, when the entire post-structural idea seems long since eclipsed, and it no longer appears naïve to show confidence in the veracity of language, there are still among classical philologists some delayed thinkers who, believing themselves pioneers of the first wave, have become fans of the “deconstruction” of texts. In fact, while they maintain that they are trying to interpret texts, they in fact toil to expose implicit prejudices, cracks in the meaning, hidden discontinuities, deceitful presuppositions, contradictory ideological constructions, hidden or suppressed secondary meanings. In short, the crisis which for them had been late in arriving has likewise been slow to depart.

It is above all from the American reception of the thought of Derrida,

through the mediation of P. de Man, that these critical tendencies, which are properly strange to the tradition of classical studies, derive their origin. The intrusion seems to be fostered by the peculiar American academic situation, in which the teaching of “Classics” and of “Comparative Literature” are often yoked, encouraging contamination between their methods of research. From this comes a strategy of reading adapted to throw light on the deviations, voids, fractures, dilemmas and incoherences of texts, despite their obvious structural unity. It is, so to speak, a strategy of listening to texts whereby the shrewd ear of the philologist attunes itself to dissonances and brings them into evidence.



The short *Discours de la Méthode* which I have just finished was intended as a preamble to a small collection of illustrative examples that I would like to use to demonstrate the concrete risks of a capricious intertextuality. If it crosses the limits of good sense, it also prejudices the efficacy of the method. I am concerned about this hazard. I shall not mention either the names of offenders nor the places (articles and books) in which they have left traces of their intemperance. *Parcere personis, dicere de uitiis* is Martial’s indulgent rule which I have taken as mine.

Let us start with the beginning of the *Aeneid*. Juno, the great goddess hostile to Troy, comes on stage immediately after the proem: she sees the fleet of the exiles guided by Aeneas as it calmly ploughs the sea along the coast of Sicily. The goddess’s anger explodes in a spiteful monologue. “Am I, defeated, to abandon my undertaking and shall I fail to divert the Trojan king from Italy?” (1.37 ff.): *haec secum*: “*mene incepto desistere uictam...?*” One scholar has not resisted the temptation to think that Virgil, imitating Homer, wanted to display programmatically his affiliation to the great model of the *Iliad* by repeating its very first words (as a kind of title), Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, “sing of the wrath, O goddess.” Is not the whole *Aeneid* occasioned by the wrath of Juno, just as the *Iliad* was occasioned by the anger of Achilles (his famous *MENIN*)? The idea lurking in the imitative echo is that Juno would provide as auspices for the narrative of the *Aeneid* a different action, an action capable of doing justice to her own anger. The intertextuality claimed would be concealed in Juno’s very first words: *MEN(e) IN(cepto)*. The elision of the *e* would in fact produce in enunciation the Greek sequence *MENIN*. But there is no elision, that is, there is no loss of the terminal vowel *e*, but instead synaloepha, fusion of the two vowels; the *pronuntiatio plena* (nothing else was possible) did not eliminate the vowel *e*, which would still be heard as it blended into the successive syllable *in-*. Furthermore, the Greek sequence *MENIN* has a short final syllable –*NIN*, whereas the syllable *IN-* of *incepto* is scanned as long. So there is no prosodic or phonetic possibility that the Greek sequence might strike the ear as similar to the Latin sequence.

But this is not all. A scholar seized by enthusiasm for the discovery of this

supposed Virgilian imitation has noted, with increased enthusiasm, that *incepto* would not just mean Juno's "undertaking"; instead *inceptum* would indicate the literary "undertaking" constituted by the *Aeneid* itself, the poem which is just beginning. Here we have critical deconstruction full-scale: it is the theory of the "self-reflecting mirror," according to which it is part of the specific nature of the literary text to speak about itself or about its composition (or decomposition). [But with a little pedestrian pedantry I would like to give warning that the word never appears in Virgil with this sense; the sense is possible only in the prosaic usage of Latin.]

Thus the poetic text would already contain in itself its own manner of deconstruction, inasmuch as it bears within it the rhetorical countersigns that characterize it as literary language. Here is an example. When Virgil, imitating Ennius, retrieves from him a long description of warriors occupied in felling timber for a funeral pyre, the Ennianizing verses are introduced by the hemistich *Itur in antiquam silvam* "they go into an ancient wood" (*Aen.* 6.179). According to a willful critic (a little deconstructionist, a little hermeneuticist), the "ancient wood" entered by the woodcutters would also be Ennius' own work, a noble text from the ancient Roman epic. In short, the Virgilian text would be recalling the archaic model, but accompanying it with a programmatic gesture of "reflexive annotation," a marginal annotation absorbed into the epic narrative; as the poet narrates the action of felling the wood, he permits his awareness of his intertextual labor to show through. I will give a better explanation. The poet describes an ancient wood but hides in its primary signification the following secondary sign: "Attention: the verses that you are reading are taken over from Ennius, the 'ancient wood' of Roman epic poetry." I don't believe it, and further I ask myself what would be the advantage in believing it.

I understand that, according to the most orthodox hermeneutic criteria (as far back as Schleiermacher, passing through his pupil Boeckh to arrive at Gadamer), interpretation should pursue the aim of understanding an author, when necessary, better than he understood himself. This is not the case. Virgil here explicitly imitates Ennius, and surely he is pleased with this theft: he scatters clear signs of admission. The real point is that here the poet of the *Aeneid* simply has the *intention of alluding* to Ennius, and the reader is summoned to act by recognizing the allusion. This is the normal mechanism by which the play of intertextual allusion functions. There was no educated reader at Rome who would not instantly recognize the model; indeed he must have known the text of Ennius by heart, from having studied and re-studied it at school. The allusion is significant in and of itself; the additional level of meaning that would contain the poet's reflection on his own verses (let us even say the higher level of meaning, whereby the text would speak about itself) exists solely in the mind of the fantasizing interpreter. In no way does Virgil's text give visible signs of behaving like a "self-reflecting mirror." But fear not! For a deconstructionist this is surely no obstacle, since the literary

text is, by its very nature, unstoppably deconstructing itself. I end with a perhaps unnecessary comment. The presence of a meta-linguistic hidden meaning would have disturbed the “heated” effect of the grandiose epic description by “chilling” the reader, detaching him from the emotional pace of the narrative. In short, Virgil would have spoiled the passage, like a man who ruins a joke by explaining it.

Do you want another example? Everyone knows that when Lesbia’s sparrow dies Catullus writes a delightful song of lament, moved by a spirit of jest. Corinna’s parrot dies and Ovid cannot resist the temptation of writing his own song equally full of grace and frivolity (*Am* .2.6). What neater homage could be paid by a chivalrous poet than to follow in the tracks of the leading poet of love and offer his beloved a jewel of witty imitation? Catullus invited all the Cupids to weep over the most cruel calamity that had made Lesbia’s lovely eyes red and swollen with weeping: *passer mortuus est meae puellae / passer deliciae meae puellae*. Ovid opens with the sad announcement: *psittacus, Eois ales imitatrix ab Indis, / occidit: exsequias ite frequenter aues*: “the parrot, winged imitator among Indians, is dead. Come in great numbers, birds, and escort his obsequies.” The deconstructionist on duty could not fail: “the *psittacus* is called an *imitatrix ales* by Ovid not just because its nature is to mimic, but because its role in the Latin erotic tradition is to ‘imitate’ that particular bird celebrated by Catullus.” In other words, the parrot is an analog of the poet Ovid, who is imitating the poet Catullus: it does not matter that, when alive, that parrot really knew how to imitate human speech (v. 48 *clamauit moriens lingua “Corinna, uale”*: “his dying tongue cried ‘farewell Corinna’”). His real function consisted in being the counterpart of Ovid, master in the art of literary imitation. This time too the poet, while apparently occupied in delivering a half-jesting funeral eulogy, would not be talking of anything but himself.

I have said before that I am preoccupied with the defence of method. A method works if its procedures are treated with respect, as rules based on objective criteria of reason, intended to ensure verifiable results. Respecting the rules of a method entails the obligation to respect its limits. Philology is an art, but it aspires to the rigor of a science. But the limit of a science is precisely to reveal the limit and name it, including its own limit, indeed above all its own. What orthodox structuralism has left as an inheritance to classical studies is just this, a strong awareness of its own limits. Its criterion of intertextuality, a systematic procedure of imitation, has made us understand how literary texts are constructed and also how they work. By anchoring its idea of the text to the science of language structuralism has entrusted to words the positive capacity of meaning. If one wanted to simplify this, one might say that structuralism has followed the empiricist axiom of St. Thomas, with a few adjustments: *Nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in textu*. This can be paraphrased: it is not possible to understand the sense of a text if one does not keep close to what it concretely declares. In fact, the structure of the text has

the capacity to *motivate* its linguistic signs, that is, it gives them a necessary meaning which is the text's own meaning and not some other, which would not be motivated because it was not functional in the structure of the text.

The intertextuality preached by orthodox structuralism, I repeat, was founded on the idea that the entire corpus constituted by the Graeco-Latin literary tradition set up a system, an accumulation of literary memories that could be synchronically ordered, ready to foster and condition the creation of new poetic compositions; but they were memories ready to find a creative function in the new context, and to be integrated into it, as if always visible and outright intentional, as in the case of open allusions. In short, they were "presences," explicit elements, linguistically expressed and philologically verifiable. On the other hand, the quite different intertextuality of the deconstructionists is made out of "absences": a previous text would be recalled because in its place, in the new text, there is a void, an unsatisfied expectation, a cleft in the discourse which stays open, like an unrealized contact. It is an intertextuality, if I can put it like this, created in order to disjoint the text. Its most serious defect is to forget that, if the system of models for imitation is spacious, only some of those possible models are in practice made *pertinent* and so retrieved in the act of poetic creation. Many others, very many indeed, are obviously left outside, unactivated. To consider them functional ingredients of the text and mobilize them as constituent components of its meaning is utterly arbitrary and misleading – quite simply, a blunder. Unless, of course, one wants to consider their missing presence in the text as the outcome of censorship, like the absence of signs that would be repressed in the author's consciousness. The consequences of such a proposition are serious: not a few interpreters, exempted from the burden of sure proof ("let us leave the words, and instead look beneath them!"), abandon themselves to utterly willful exegetic fantasies.

Here is an exemplary instance. An inventive interpreter starts from the assumption, partly true, partly exaggerated, that Dido is modelled on the *Medea* of Euripides.⁴³ Certainly Dido, like Medea, is a woman abandoned by her man, though not on account of another woman. And her invectives against Aeneas to some extent resemble those of Medea against Jason: Virgil knew how to learn much from Euripides, that brilliant explorer of female suffering and poet of extreme pathos. In book IV of Virgil's poem Dido has two tempestuous meetings with Aeneas. In the first she begs him in tears, still hoping to sway him; in the second she has long since despaired and curses him with loathing. This is a dramatic progression, destined to end with her suicide, the extreme act with which the queen redeems her humiliated pride.

At the end of the first encounter, in an attempt to melt Aeneas' frozen resolve, she sounds a tender note (327–30): "O, if at least I had had a son by you before your flight, if a little Aeneas played in my palace, to recall your features to me, I would not seem, no, to be totally betrayed and deserted": *si quis mihi paruulus aula / luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret*. In

connection with the *paruulus Aeneas* and Dido's lament for her lost maternity, our interpreter senses "a sinister irony" resounding in those pathetic words. Behind (beneath) the words of the grief-stricken queen ("if only I had a little Aeneas ...") our shrewd reader infers her unexpressed desire to kill that *paruulus Aeneas* and so make herself absolutely the rival of Medea, the murderess of her sons. Under this hypothesis, the model of the tragic Medea invented by Euripides would have driven Virgil completely, yielding not a selective retrieval of some assimilable poetic features, but a calque, a matching copy (in this respect it is unfortunate that Medea too did not commit suicide on a pyre, but instead fled by magic means on a chariot drawn by winged steeds).

There is even someone, seized by enthusiasm for this foreign notion, who wanted to add, with a kind of supporting argument, that the words *paruulus Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret* would prove that the motive for Dido's wish to kill her son is the "resemblance" to Aeneas. But not even Medea kills her sons *because they look like their father Jason*, certainly not in Euripides' text. The text of Virgil is clear: the relative *qui te tamen ore referret* corrects *paruulus*: "a little Aeneas, who although little, would still recall you in his features." The diminutive *paruulus*, it is agreed, is a unique instance in the *Aeneid*; its affective connotations are quite foreign to the lofty language of epic. Virgil has taken it from the lexicon of love-poetry, which knows how to indulge in endearments and caresses. He wanted it here where the grandeur of the epic-heroic discourse (already tinged with tragic colours) yields for a moment to the sweetness of feminine sentiment; here it is not the offended queen who is talking.

We must have patience with the fantasist tendency of interpreters; we know, after all, that poetry signifies more than it says. However, to me the severe damage that is inflicted on Virgil and his exceptional sensibility as a poet of compassion by bringing Medea into the picture is insupportable. Dido's allusion to the lack of a little son is the demented complaint of a woman in love, it is the tormented bitterness of a lost opportunity: these words (I repeat) are contained in the *first* invective, when Dido still deludes herself that she can prevent Aeneas from departing and is choosing words that might move him; they could not have stood in the *second*, a desperate invective brimming with curses and implacable spite. The victim of fatal events and the intrigue of pitiless goddesses, Dido wins in recompense the full sympathy of her poet, who encourages with delicacy the most human emotions of her spirit. All this is brutally thrust aside by an interpretation that, while it believes that it understands more, *substitutes* for what is in the text what could never have been in it. The loss is enormous; not only is the meaning of the words perverted but the affective resonances of bitterness and regret are eliminated from the text – though they are as Virgilian as can be.

But someone will answer (voicing the theories of Harold Bloom, another too influential post-structuralist from the United States) that

“misunderstanding” or “misreading” is the attitude that normally governs how all new poetry relates itself to the previous poetic tradition – an attitude that would be proper also to criticism, which creatively interprets, and misunderstands, a literary text. It is obvious to everyone that Ovid could have misunderstood Virgil’s art, but the meaning of the text of Virgil did not therefore change. Ovid practiced his own trade, Virgil remained Virgil.⁴⁴ It is not accidental, in fact, that our interpreter (a self-titled connoisseur of Virgil’s unconscious, but not in the least conscious of the limits of the method) describes his deviant reader like this: “a reader whom we could call ‘Ovidian’, one who instinctively takes account of potentially embarrassing implications which the authority of an intertextual model could bring of its own accord.” Even the interpreter himself realizes that his idea is better suited to Ovid than to Virgil. But this is no problem for him. Indeed, he says, we have “the authority of an intertextual model” which legitimizes the idea. The authority of an intertextual model? That is just what is missing. In fact there is no intertextual model, there is no specific recall of a genuinely extant text for us to confront. What we have is only an intermittent contact between two literary characters, the recurrence of a *few* elements common to Medea and Dido: they are isolated pieces of a complex mosaic which Virgil has seen in Euripides and has briefly retrieved to construct the story of his abandoned heroine.

One should always keep in mind that an imitation, a reminiscence, does not share everything that is present in the model. At times only its signifiers are mobilized, at other times only the signified; on one occasion it is the form of expression which is stolen, on other occasions the content. For the most part, the contacts with the model are accidental fragments of text that transmigrate, resurfacing from the most spacious repository of literary tradition. A grave blunder, and one of the most common, is to imagine that an imitation carries with it the whole load of meaning of the prototype, contained in every part of it, through its whole textual development. Then there is another methodological condition that must not be neglected: allusion wants to mark the theft by leaving a trail of recognizable traces. The stolen text has its own story, which makes it noble and precious. Appropriation, precisely because it is an act of force and display, does not hide the name of the previous owner, but leaves unmistakeable signs of his identity. This is the crucial point of the enquiry: the signs. These are there to alert the reader and the philologist, precisely because in their absence intertextuality does not work. Systematic structuralism and literary semiology made signs the substance of texts, and never wanted to dispense with them in their theorizing. To seek meanings to which no adequate signs (I mean adequate words and expressions) correspond is not among the duties of philology. We might grant that the dissemination of meaning can also be a stimulus for new interpretations, but this is not in the power of the intertextual method to deliver. The method gives a good harvest, its own fruit, and cannot give more; its strength consists in accepting its own limits. To cross those limits cancels

out, *illico et immediate*, its validity.

Endnotes

1 *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario: Catullo, Virgilio, Ovidio, Lucano*, Turin, Einaudi (1974) (2nd edition 1985 with an author's epilogue): it was recently re-issued by Sellerio (Palermo 2012) with a preface by C. Segre. An English translation including some other later studies of mine was published in 1986 by Cornell University Press (Ithaca-London), edited by Charles Segal under the title *The Rhetoric of Imitation; genre and poetic memory in Virgil and other Latin Poets*.

2 Plutarch *Institutions of the Ancient Spartans*, 237.12; *Sayings of the Spartans*, 234.35.

3 Eliot, *Elizabethan Essays*; cf. T. S. Eliot, *Philip Massinger*, in *The Sacred Wood, essays on Poetry and Criticism* London, Faber and Faber 1997 (1921), pp. 105–6.

4 A recent publication of S. McGill, *Plagiarism in Latin literature*, Cambridge University Press 2012, throws light on the ancient debate with an abundance of materials and much acuity of judgment.

5 *Sit Ennius, sane, ut est certe, perfectior; qui si illum (sc. Naeuium) ut simulate contemneret, non omnia bella persquens primum illud Punicum acerrimum bellum reliquisset. Sed ipse dicit cur id faciat :“scripsere, ‘inquit,’ alii rem vorsibus”: et luculente quidem scripserunt, etiam si minus quam tu polite. Nec uero tibi aliter uideri debet, qui a Naeuium uel sumpsisti multa, si fateris, uel si negas, subripiuisti.*

6 E. Berti *Scholasticorum Studia, Seneca il Vecchio e la cultura retorica e letteraria della prima età imperiale*, (as Eduard Norden had already suggested in *Vergilstudien*, Vol II, p. 506, anticipated by Fr. Leo, *De Senecae Tragoediis obseruationes criticae*, Berlin, Weidmann 1878, p. 166 note 8). This hypothesis is confirmed in the commentary of Servius in which the locution *plena deo* features as a gloss (*ad Aen.* 6.50 *ADFLATA EST NUMINE, nondum deo plena sed adflata uicinitate numinis.*) See now the monumental commentary of N. Horsfall: *Virgil Aeneid* 6, Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter 2013 Vol II App. 1, pp. 627–9.

7 See the rich anthology of texts gathered by D.A. Russell and M. Winterbottom: *Ancient Literary Criticism. The Principal texts in New Translations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1972.

8 Cf. Eugenio Montale, *Saturna II*: « Le parole / sono di tutti e invano / si celano nei dizionari », in *L'opera in versi*, ed. critica R. Bettarini e G. Contini vol.I *Le raccolte approvate*, Turin, Einaudi 1980, p. 365.

9 Cf E.H. Gombrich, *Lo Stile all' antica; imitazione ed assimilazione in Norm and form; Studies on the Art of the Renaissance*; see also M. Bettini *Tra Plinio e sant'Agostino, Francesco Petrarca sulle arti figurative in Memoria dell antico nell arte italiana*, I, ed. S. Settis, *1 L'uso dei classici*, Turin Einaudi 1984, pp. 233–4.

10 Cf. Sen. *Contr.* 9.3.12; Pliny *Letters* 1.5.2.

11 *De Architectura, Praef.* VII, 8–9.

12 A. Barchiesi offers a rich and finely articulated analysis of the two passages, Homeric and Virgilian, in *La Traccia del Modello, Effetti Homerici nella narrazione Virgiliana*, Pisa, Giardini 1984 (“Biblioteca of Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici” = MD I), pp. 11–54. See also the excellent *Die Aeneis und Homer. Studien zur poetischen Technik Vergils mit Listen der Homerzitate in der Aeneis, “Hypomnemata 7”*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964.

13 Hercules, as Virgil has explained in book 8, was the guest of Pallas's father

Evander and so owed him an act of reciprocal hospitality.

14 The dialogue between Manet and Titian and the emotionally provocative contrast of *Olympia* with the *Venus of Urbino* was suggested in the splendid exhibition *Manet. Return to Venice* mounted in the Doge's palace in Venice (24 April to 18 August 2013); it was conceived and planned by Gabriella Belli and Guy Cogeval (the catalogue was edited by Stephane Guegan, Geneva-Milan, Skirà, 2013). On the theme of the appropriation of the Titianic model achieved by Manet, I also remember the pages of Daniel Arasse *La donna del cassone*, now also found in *Non si vede niente, Descrizioni* Turin, Einaudi 2013, pp. 99–131, especially p. 102: “if art has had a history and continues to have one, it is only thanks to the work of the artists, and, among other things, thanks to their attention to the works of the past, and the way in which they have appropriated those works.”

15 On Virgil's sublime we should still read the pages of R. Heinze *Virgils Epische Technik*, Leipzig-Berlin, Teubner 19153, pp. 481–93.

16 Read Seneca *Suasoriae* 1.12 *Vergilius...ita magnitudine studet, ut non imprudenter discedat a fide* (he does not distance himself from the right degree of the plausible).

17 Cf e.g. *Aen.* 6.88–94 *Non Simois tibi nec Xanthus nec Dorica castra/ defuerint; alius Latio iam partus Achilles / natus et ipse dea; nec Teucris addita Iuno usquam aberit...// Causa mali tanti coniunx iterum hospita Teucris / externique iterum thalami*. See too 8.538 ff. *quam multa sub undas/ scuta uirum galeasque et fortia corpora uolues, / Thybri pater!* and compare 1.100 ff. *ubi tot Simois correpta sub undis/ scuta uirum galeasque et fortia corpora uoluit*.

18 For an acute and innovative examination of the “repetition” of Homer in the *Aeneid*, cf. D. Quint *Repetition and Ideology in the Aeneid*, “Materiali e Discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici”, 33, 1989, pp. 9–54 (now in his *Epic and Empire*, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 50–96).

19 See Heinze *Virgil's Epische Technik* (cited above), p. 465.

20 In fact the unanimous manuscript tradition and not a few editors read *dona dehinc auro grauia sectoque elephanto*. Servius, who also reads this text, notes the prolongation in *ars*i of the last syllable of *grauia*, to justify it *finalitatis ratione*: he is troubled (*sed satis aspere*) but accepts the text. Many editors in his wake cite as reinforcement *Georg.* 1.279; *Aen.* 3.91 and 12.363 (in all three passages the phenomenon of prolongation in *ars*i involves the enclitic *-que*). But the corruption had a more complex genesis. Schaper understood this when he recognized that *secto elephanto* was a calc of a Homeric clausula particularly notorious for its hiatus. The imitation of this unusual hiatus in Latin must have created confusion very early among its ancient readers, given that the verse was readjusted as it has been transmitted; scribes wrote *sectoque* and the scandal was eliminated, but this also cancelled out the borrowing from Homer. Schaper had no difficulty, once he had detected the trail of imitation, in restoring the verse to its original form, *dona dehinc auro grauia ac secto elephanto*. Cf. G.B.Conte *Ope Ingenii; esperienze di critica testuale*, Pisa, Edizione della Normale 2013, pp. 100–101 (= *Ope ingenii, Experiences of Textual Criticism*, Berlin/Boston, DeGruyter, 2013, pp. 88–89).

21 In *Implicazioni leopardiane*, “Letteratura 9/33, 1847, p. 102, now in *Varianti e altra linguistica. Una raccolta di saggi (1938–68)*, Turin, Einaudi 1970, p. 41.

22 Initially included in the series “La Ricerca letteraria,” it was reprinted in 1985 in the “PBE” series.

23 See P. Pettit, *The concept of structuralism: a critical analysis*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, U. California Press 1975.

24 *Illusione sulla genesi delle opere d'arte documentata dagli scartafacci degli scrittori*, in “Quaderni della Critica” 9, 1947, pp. 93–4 (= *Nuove pagine sparse*, Bari, Laterza 1966, pp. 238–9).

25 *La Critica degli Scartafacci*, in “Rassegna d' Italia”, 3, 1948, pp. 1048–56 and

1156–60 (now in id. *La critica degli scartafacci e altre pagine sparse*, with a memoir by A. Roncaglia, Pisa, Scuola Normale Superiore 1992, pp. 1–32).

26 See M. Ciliberto, *Contini, e gli 'scartafacci'*, in “Giornale critico della filosofia Italiana” seventh series, 7, 2013, pp. 277–301 (now reprinted as the introductory essay to G. Contini “*L’influenza culturale di Benedetto Croce*,” Pisa, Edizioni della Normale 2013).

27 This assessment of *Quellenforschung* underlies much of the work of Wilhelm Kroll, a rigid positivist and most learned thrasher of poetic *imitatio* in the name of an absolute originality, but his *Studien zum Verständnis der Römischen Literatur* are still valuable (Stuttgart, Metzler 1924 [19642], in particular the seventh chapter on *Originalität und Nachahmung*, pp. 139–84).

28 For a more extended treatment see G.B. Conte, A. Barchiesi, *Imitazione e arte allusiva. Modi e funzioni dell'intertestualità*, in *Lo spazio letterario di Roma antica*, I, *La produzione del testo*, Roma, Salerno editrice 1989, pp. 81–114.

29 The survey of G.F. Pasini, *Dossier sulla critica dei fonti (1896–1909)*, Bologna, Patron 1988, is very useful.

30 *La Critica Letteraria. Questioni teoriche*, Rome, Loescher 1894 (18961), then in *Primi Saggi*, Bari Laterza, 1919 (19272), where we read on p. 92: “it is helpful here to note that if source criticism has been highly exalted in Italy in recent times, men have neglected to enumerate the many dangers to which the excessive and distorted use of source criticism can give rise. The chief risk is the illusion that a literary work breaks down into the sources to which it has been traced back.”

31 B. Croce, *Il plagio e la Letteratura*, in “La Critica” 1, 1903, pp. 468–70 (= *Problemi di estetica e contributi alla storia dell'estetica italiana*), Bari, Laterza 1910 (19666), pp. 67–70.

32 For clarity I must cite myself, with apologies: “even in the art of allusion, as in every other figure, the poetic dimension is produced by the co-presence of two differing realities that aim to indicate a single reality as complex as one wishes, but in any case unitary – perhaps undefinable by direct means but certainly individuated and specific, at least for the poet. The poetic idea stands in the space between the letter and its meaning –without wishing to be only the one or the other – and this space (still unknown), this gap, cannot be indicated except by referring to the two (known) extremes which limit it” (*Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, 1974, p. 14).

33 W.K. Wimsatt, M. Beardsley, *The Affective Fallacy* (1948), in M. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press 1954, p. 21.

34 I can only refer readers to the very rich study and commentary of N. Marinone, *Berenice from Callimachus to Catullus*, Rome, Edizioni dell’Ateneo 1984.

35 I tried to give a detailed analysis of this imitation in *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, 1974, pp. 65–68. I limit myself here to essentials; what interests me is discussing the problem of intentionality (which I wanted to challenge by means of the comparison of two sets of paired and competing illustrations).

36 The italics are mine. I am drawing on a study by P.V. Mengaldo in “Quaderni del Circolo Filologico-linguistico Padovano” 1, 1966, where these words are featured in an epigraph.

37 M. Valgimigli *Resegone Citerone*, in *La Mula di Don Abbondio*, Bologna, Cappelli 1954, pp. 137 ff.; see also M. Bettini in “Materiali e Discussioni per l’analisi dei testi classici” 6, 1981, p. 159.

38 The letter of Carducci to Chiarini of 16 April 1885 (quoted by Valgimigli, cf. n. 17).

39 I have in mind the irritable and dismissive E. Narducci, *Deconstructing Lucan. Ovvero le nozze (coi fichi secchi) di Ermete Trismegisto e di Filologia*, in *Interpretare Lucano: Miscellanea di Studi*, ed. P. Esposito and L. Nicastrì, Naples, Arte Tipografica

1999, pp. 39–83.

40 F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885–1887*, 7 (60), in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Werke*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, Berlin, De Gruyter 1967–vol.VI/1 (Italian translation *Frammenti postumi*, in *Opere Complete*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, Milan, Adelphi 1964, vol. VIII.1, p. 299.)

41 The problem is brilliantly treated in C. Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric and Proof*, lectures given in Israel at the Menahem Stern Jerusalem University and published by Brandeis, The University Press of New England, Hanover 1999. There is now an Italian translation entitled *Rapporti di Forza, Storia, retorica, prova*, Milan, Feltrinelli 2000.

42 Compare B. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness. An essay in Genealogy*, Princeton University Press 2002 (Italian translation *Genealogie della Verità*, Rome, Fazi 2005, pp. 17–23).

43 Just as relevant to her character, and perhaps more marked, is the suggestion of the *Ajax* of Sophocles; I have discussed this in *The Poetry of Pathos*, Oxford 2007, pp. 158–60.

44 In fact, Ovid in Dido's letter (*Her.* 7.132–8) develops the idea that the queen would destroy the child, even if Dido does not want to kill with her own hand the son conceived with Aeneas (as in Medea's case). Rather, the son would die in her womb on the pyre of suicide. If anything, for Virgil's Dido, the lament for a child unconceived is a lament *for having no reason to remain alive*.